

LEGACY'S EDGE
PERFECT NIGHT

GREGORY O. SCOTT

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What's Gone Before

After the fall of the Galactic Empire, the Jedi Order was reborn under **Luke Skywalker** and established itself as keepers of peace and justice across the galaxy. When the galaxy was invaded by the fearsome Yuuzhan Vong, an alien race invisible to the Force, the Jedi led the effort to defeat them. Following the war, the Yuuzhan Vong were exiled to the living planet Zonama Sekot, where the Jedi worked to reform and redeem their race.

Decades passed. While the Galactic Alliance ruled on Coruscant, the Imperial Remnant reformed and regained power. After a war for supremacy against hard-line rivals a new emperor was declared, the first since the death of Palpatine. **Davek Fel**, son of **Jagged Fel** and **Jaina Solo**, was determined to continue the values of his parents, even if it meant ruling with an iron hand. His Jedi brother **Arlen**, rejecting his methods, left the Empire and took his daughter to the Jedi Temple on Ossus.

Leadership of the Jedi passed to Luke's son **Ben** and later to the Wookiee **Lowbacca**. The Jedi faced numerous threats, including the continued machinations by the One Sith and the ancient abomination Abeloth, who was finally defeated by **Jade Skywalker**. A century after the Battle of Yavin, a Jedi force led by Lowbacca, Arlen, and Jade destroyed the One Sith's hidden fortress in the Hapes Cluster, seemingly ending their threat forever.

The victory was not without cost. Arlen's daughter left the Jedi Order to make a new life as **Marin Solo**. Davek Fel was assassinated in the middle of battle and his older son **Vitor** was slain. The throne then passed to his teenage son.

Another twenty-seven have years passed since the battle at Shedu Maad. **Roan Fel** continues to rule the Empire. The One Sith survive and work their machinations in secret under command of the ancient former Jedi, **Darth Krayt**. Meanwhile, leadership of the Jedi has passed to Jade's son, **Kol Skywalker**, whose dream is to use Yuuzhan Vong bio-engineering to rebuild worlds damaged in their invasion a century ago. His lofty aim is to redeem the Yuuzhan Vong in the eyes of the galaxy, but enemies marshall in the shadows, ready to use the Jedi's very nobility against them...

Dramatis Personae

Nyna Calixte, Imperial moff (human female)
Antares Draco, apprentice Imperial knight (human male)
Arlen Fel, Jedi Master (human male)
Elliah Chalk Fel, Empress (human female)
Marasiah Fel, Imperial princess (human female)
Roan Fel, Emperor (human male)
Darth Krayt, Dark Lord of the Sith (human male)
K'Kruhk, Jedi Master (Whiphid male)
Relik K'sharn, warlord (Nagai male)
Khat Lah, warrior (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Lekhwash, Galactic Alliance admiral (Quarren male)
Lowbacca, Jedi Master (Wookiee male)
Darth Maladi, Sith Lord (Devaronian female)
Eshkar Niin, Imperial knight (Iktotchi male)
Nei Rin, master shaper (Yuuzhan Vong female)
Tamar Skirata, Mandalorian (human female)
Cade Skywalker, Jedi apprentice (human male)
Jade Skywalker, Jedi Master (human female)
Kol Skywalker, Jedi Master (human male)
Nat Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)
Ania Solo, child (human female)
Marin Solo, freighter pilot (human female)
Gar Stazi, Galactic Alliance admiral (Duros male)
Darth Vorkan, Sith Lord (Blood Carver male)
Jaius Yorub, captain, *Indomitable* (Sullustan male)

Prologue: Ancestors

“It is no small feat to bring down the Jedi Order,” the Dark Lord said, “But it has been done before.”

They sat at attention in Darth Krayt’s most secure audience chamber beneath the ruins of Korriban. There was Darth Maladi, his spymaster, a red-faced Devaronian woman who watched cold eyes. There was his Hand, Darth Vorkan. His most trusted enforcer was a Blood Carver, tall and thin with long three-jointed limbs and small predator’s eyes on an oblong face. Black tattoos traced patterns against the natural gold of his skin. Finally there was Darth Wyyrlok, the third of that name. Like his mother and grandfather before him, the red-and-black Chagrian was Krayt’s most trusted servant.

He had many more servants than these three, but they were the essentials. With them, he would remake the galaxy.

Encased within savage spikes of yorik coral armor, seated upon an old stone throne, Darth Krayt said, “Four thousand years ago, the Jedi were nearly wiped out. Trauma forged Darth Nihilus into a living wound in the Force. His raw power destroyed the man he’d been but allowed him to devour Force-users body and soul. With his allies he hunted down the remaining Jedi and exterminated the fugitives, ridding the galaxy of their influence.

“Yet the Jedi rebounded. The surviving scraps defeated Darth Nihilus and multiplied while the Sith were reduced to a few embers that would take centuries to restart the flame. The Sith rose and fell again, never achieving total supremacy over the Jedi. In their desperation for victory and lust for

personal power they warred against each other until finally Darth Bane decreed that the dark side's power was being wasted, and that it must be conserved in two vessels. With one master and one apprentice, the Sith progressed their grand design, undermining the Old Republic from within, weakening its foundations while at the same time encouraging the corruption of the Jedi Order."

Krayt's eyes passed across his assembled Sith. One blazed the brilliant red-gold that marked a user of the dark side of the Force; the other eye was icy blue, marking it as a foreign object implanted in him by his Yuuzhan Vong captors a century ago.

"Darth Sidious brought the grand design into fruition, and he built upon generations of labor. His genius, however, was that he made the Jedi accomplices to their own destruction. In engineering the Clone Wars he created the perfect trap. By fighting, the Jedi bound themselves to a corrupt Republic and became demons in the eyes of half the galaxy. If the Jedi had not fought, had they let the war rage unchecked or allowed the Republic to fall, they would have still been accomplices to chaos and slaughter. The Jedi, complacent after centuries in power, allowed themselves to be drawn into this trap, unaware it *was* a trap until its jaws snapped shut around them. Even the light of the Jedi fed the darkness, and when all the galaxy was swallowed in perfect night there was nothing they could do."

Krayt lowered his head and closed his eyes, giving himself to remembrance. Much of his two centuries of life had been spent sealed in stasis and walking through dreams, travelling on currents of the Force to see past and future. In his mind it was still vivid after all these many years:

Mortars scream through the skies of Saleucami. Shelling of the Republic redoubt has not stopped for ten standard hours. It is midday but smoke and ash fill the sky and swallow daylight. The explosions never stop. It is impossible to sleep.

He tries anyway. He crouches beneath a rocky overhang, back against stone, legs splayed out before him. Weariness is a black hole trying to suck him into sleep but the explosions never stop. His hands rest on his thighs and each one grips a

silver cylinder. The enemy is still far off and he has no use for his lightsabers right now, but he's reluctant to let them go. One belonged to his father, a great Jedi Knight. The other he constructed himself. They're twin talismans, giving him comfort when he needs it badly.

A figure emerges from the surrounding haze. He doesn't move from his spot beneath the rock. The other Jedi joins him instead. Master K'Kruhk sets his heavy body down and says, "Master Vos believes a division of droids may be approaching from the south. They're jamming all our sensors. He wants to send a scouting mission soon."

He doesn't want to do anything but stay beneath this rock and drift into sleep. "I am not in the best condition."

"We are all fatigued. We are all grieving. But we must keep up the fight."

K'Kruhk doesn't sound as if he believes his own words. Master Rancisis fell to Anzati assassins two days ago, depriving the Jedi on Saleucami of their wisest and the most powerful member. It is not their first loss and it will not be the last. All the Jedi know this, which makes the pall it casts all the darker.

"How do you believe this war will end?" he asks. He is not given to voicing doubts and fears, but with K'Kruhk he feels he can talk. The giant, gentle Whiphid left the Jedi at the start of the war because he believed it was wrong for peacekeepers to become warriors. For a brief time he joined a group of fellow objectors led by Sora Bulq, the Dark Jedi who now commands the Separatist stronghold at Saleucami and sent assassins to murder Master Rancisis.

"The Separatists have been chased to forgotten corners of the Outer Rim and put under siege. They have no hope of victory." K'Kruhk's voice is deep and thoughtful. "It may take months or even years, but they will be defeated by the Republic."

"I meant, how will it end for the Jedi?"

"I know. I cannot say. I feel as though darkness is everywhere... as though we are being drowned in it."

"Jedi have not fought a war like this in a thousand years," he says. Unlike K'Kruhk, he had not balked to fight. His

father was a Jedi and died leading a righteous war. Deep down, he wonders if he fears death less than surviving with all this conflict's scars.

"War breeds fear, anger, despair, and hatred. It creates the dark side," K'Kruhk says. "There's no greater tragedy for Jedi than to become warriors."

"Then why are you here now?"

K'Kruhk looks at the smoke-black sky and watches a few fiery mortar shells arc past. "I stand with my brothers and sisters in the Force."

He looks at his two lightsabers. Since this war began he's wondered if there wasn't something more he could do. The galaxy has been rent asunder, billions of lives lost and more afflicted by suffering. The Jedi say they've done their best to end this war, but what have they accomplished besides cowering beneath rocks and dying one-by-one? If the Force is as all-powerful as Master Yoda says, then it should have the power to stop this war. It should bring order and peace to everyone.

His father led the Tusken of Tatooine in a war against their oppressors, even though he was not a native Tusken himself. When he asked his father why, his father has said that though he was a Tusken he was still a Jedi. Because of the special gifts he'd been given he had not just the right but the duty to lead his people and accomplish things they could not, limited as they were without the Force. If peace could only come from the blaze of a lightsaber, so be it.

K'Kruhk asks him, "Do you believe the rumor that there is an architect of this war behind Count Dooku?"

He's heard those rumors. "You mean a Sith?"

K'Kruhk nods gravely.

He is not sure. Though the Sith have laid low for a millennia they are not dead. He's seen the holo-recordings of the Sith Obi-wan Kenobi fought on Naboo. The face of that ferocious red-and-black tattooed Zabrak lingers in the back of his mind as an icon of dark and savage power.

If this whole war is a Sith creation then it is a masterstroke. Across the galaxy there are as many who revile the Jedi as who love them. Every knight, master, and padawan has

struggled with the inner darkness that comes from war. Some have even succumbed. None of them will be the same Jedi they were before.

And yet, he finds himself skeptical. It did not take Sith to kill his father, only greedy criminal scum.

"I think this war doesn't need Sith," he says. "The corruption of the Senate, the greed of the Trade Federation and Techno Union, Master Dooku's pride... The galaxy is full of darkness and chaos. Master Windu says that is the natural state of things, and that we Jedi must create light and peace ourselves. Only through us can there be order."

"Is it truly the Jedi's order to give?"

He looks down at his lightsabers. His own, and his father's. Fighting the righteous fight had killed his father. It could be different for him, if he were stronger.

"Sometimes," he says. "Perhaps."

His eyes opened. His Sith acolytes were still before him, faces marked in ferocious tattoos like that long-dead Zabrak. That visage had once instilled him with fear. Now he had conquered that fear and made its terrible power his own. His fire-and-ice stare passed over Maladi, Vorkan, and Wyyrlok and found their faces pleasing.

"When the Yuuzhan Vong invaded a century ago," he said, "they cut Luke Skywalker's nascent Jedi Order in half. They recognized the Jedi threat from the start and adopted the methods of Sidious without even knowing it. They offered to halt their invasion if only the people of the galaxy handed Jedi over for slaughter. In their panic and fear many obeyed, and the Jedi were betrayed by those they'd pledged to protect. Many started to blame the Jedi for continuing a war they'd done everything to stop."

Krayt allowed a smile at the irony, but it faded quickly. "For the Jedi to die, their *idea* must die. As Sidious made them villains in the eyes of the galaxy, so will we. The New Jedi Order thinks it has changed. It thinks it has learned from past mistakes. It is wrong. In clinging to the light side of the Force they have already made their fatal error. They wrap themselves in lies of altruism and peace while still seeking to impose their will upon the galaxy. We Sith have the same

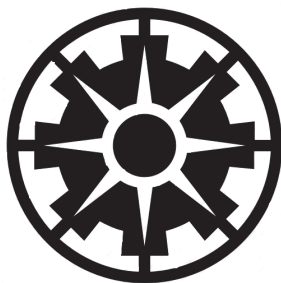
desire, but we embrace it without illusion. We will succeed because the truth had set us free.

“Because the truth is ours, we need not limit ourselves to master and apprentice. We are *One* Sith, united in our service to the dark and our singular goal of bringing order to this galaxy. It took Bane’s acolytes a millennium to bring down the Old Republic. We stand poised to do the same after only a century. Our success speaks for itself.

“The Jedi have now bound themselves to those who nearly destroyed them. Their belief in redemption and forgiveness has made them the Yuuzhan Vong’s foremost champions. The people of the galaxy respect the Jedi, but they revile the alien invaders. The Jedi hope to lift the Vong up in the public eye, but a century’s penance is not enough to earn them absolution. We will make certain the Jedi are cast down to the level of the aliens. The Jedi’s own light will become darkness and they will be consumed in perfect night. Once that is done, once the Jedi and Vong become twin curses on everyone’s tongue, we will step into view. Once we exterminate the Jedi we will be hailed as saviors by a galaxy desperate for security only we can bring. And once we have saved the galaxy from the twin threats of Yuuzhan Vong and Jedi, it will be ours to remake.”

Eyes of fire, eyes of ice passed across his acolytes. “It is no small feat to bring down the Jedi Order,” Darth Krayt said, “But the greatest Sith Lords of the past have done it, and so shall we. Our victory has already begun.”

PART I



SPARK AND FLAME

Chapter One

The forest was a dream become nightmare. What were once tall trees green with life were now hard pillars bristling with thorns. Vines became lashing tentacles and mutant amphistaffs burst from the undergrowth like tall grass topped by snapping long-toothed jaws. Trying to pass through the forest meant navigating a maze of death.

A world itself had turned against them. The planet-wide terraforming scheme enacted with the help of Yuuzhan Vong shapers had transformed Wayland's war-ravaged landscape to a verdant paradise in just a few years. Mere weeks had turned dream to savage nightmare. Kol Skywalker had no idea what had gone wrong on Wayland, but there was no time to guess and no time to wonder what horrible ramifications this could have for the rest of the galaxy. To save himself, his son, and the others he cared about, Kol had to fight.

Kol and his former apprentice Wolf Sazen led the way, hacking through the deadly tangles. Kol's shirt had been torn to shreds and amphistaff-tails left bloody streaks down his chest. Sazen's black hair was a tangle; sweat and dirt smeared the young Zabrak's face.

The Yuuzhan Vong followed: Nei Rin, her fellow shapers, and the handful of warriors that had been with them. Kol's son Cade and Shado Vao held up the rear; though mere apprentices, just twelve years old, desperation fed their bravery as they fought off attacks from behind with two blue lightsabers.

A thick tentacle swept out of nowhere. Kol tried to leap above it but it coiled around his legs, pinning them together, digging thorns through his already-bloody trousers and into his skin. In his panic he barely felt the pain. Kol snapped his torso forward, swung his blade low, and tore through the tentacle. It dropped him on the ground and he kicked free as its dismembered tip spasmed and flailed. As he scrambled to his feet he saw another beast charging toward them, all long fangs and long talons, and felt Cade coming to help.

“Keep moving!” Kol called and use the Force to summon a gust of hot air that knocked the monster back. “Get to the ship!”

Cade and Shado turned to run, then jumped back as a four-armed Myneyrshi rose in front of them. The Wayland native’s eyes were blank with fury and it clasped long blades in three of its four hands. Sazen released a blast of energy that threw the maddened, Vongformed creature back, but more were coming. Too many to fight off.

“Wolf, get the boys into the ship,” Kol panted. “Prep for takeoff.”

Cade and Shado protested, but Sazen used a tug of the Force to pull them away. Kol fell back to Nei Rin, the shapers and their bodyguards. The Yuuzhan Vong warriors were as shocked as the Jedi at the sudden and horrific turn Wayland had taken. Just months ago this planet had been a lush paradise, a model product for the massive cooperative project the Jedi Order and Yuuzhan Vong had embarked on over the past five years. Under their guidance, a hundred planets savaged by the Yuuzhan Vong invasion a century before had rebuilt their ecosystems using the same Vongforming technology that had spoiled them.

But something had ruined it all, and Kol’s only hope was that the disaster on Wayland was not being replicated elsewhere.

Kol fought alongside the Yuuzhan Vong warriors, pushing back their Myneyrshi attackers. The Myneyrshi had been one of the first people to accept help from the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong in rebuilding their world, showing none of the

suspicious so many others had. Their reward was a fate worse than death.

Whatever mutations had ruined the Vongforming experiment on Wayland had even consumed its native sentients. Thorns like yorik coral spurs now broke through the Myneyrshi's skin, and their eyes blazed with mindless animal fury.

As Kol and Nei Rin fell back onto the metal slant of their ship's landing ramp, the rabid natives chased after them. Kol gave Nei Rin a push toward the entrance, spun around, and lashed his lightsaber in a broad horizontal sweep that caused them to stagger back a step. Whatever had possessed the Myneyrshi had driven them mad but not suicidally so, not yet.

"The shaper witch has cursed us!" one Myneryshi called from the bottom of the landing ramp. Its voice grated with pain and rabid fury. "Why has she not changed? Why have you Jedi been spared? We demand Rite of Punishment! Give her to use, Jedi, or die with her!"

"No! We have not done this!" Nei Rin said. "It can only be sabotage!"

"Reason has left them, Nei Rin." Kol kept his lightsaber held up between him and the Myneyrshi. "Get on the ship. We have to go *now*."

With the Force he reached out and touched Sazen's mind, signaling for him to take off. The ship kicked off on repulsors and the landing ramp shook beneath Kol's feet. The nearest Myneyrshi surged toward him and he used the Force to push them off the ramp, dropping them to the ground.

"Listen to me!" Kol shouted down at them as the shuttle struggled to rise. "What happened here was not our doing, but we *will* return! We *will* make it right! I *swear* it!"

The Myneyrshi cried out beneath them, for blood and death and justice. Their horrible wail was drowned out by the rush of wind and the roar of the shuttle's engines, and then by the awful scrape and groan as the Vongformed forest beneath them reached up with snaking thorned tentacles to drag them back.

Kol was in the hold along with the Yuuzhan Vong when the shuttle lurched, throwing him off his feet. He slid across the slanted deck and his bare shoulder slammed hard into the rough yorik coral spikes of the nearest warrior's armor. He let out a groan of pain, barely finished when the shuttle lurched again. He spread sweaty palms across metal to keep himself from sliding and heard the crunch of metal beneath the tightening grip of the tentacles.

"Wolf!" he shouted toward the cockpit, "Are we off the ground?"

"Yes, but we can't get past the forest!" his apprentice called back.

"Open the ramp back up," Kol said, and called his lightsaber to his hand from the corner of the hold. "Try twisting this ship! Do you hear me? *Twist* it."

"Those tentacles could crush us!"

"That's why we have to break free. *Do* it, Wolf!"

The ship attempted to throw him around again, but this time Kol was ready. Using the Force to steady himself he crawled toward the landing ramp as it re-opened. As soon as it did the tip of a thorny tentacle tried to push itself inside the shuttle. Kol was ready and slashed it apart with two fast swipes. A pair of Yuuzhan Vong warriors were crawling across the deck to join him.

"Keep me steady!" Kol called and extended his free hand. One warrior, knowing exactly what he needed, lashed out with the tail end of his amphistaff. The prehensile creature wrapped tight around Kol's wrist as he angled the rest of himself down the ramp.

Hot wind blew in his face but he swung his lightsaber out again, cleaving through part of another tentacle. As Wolf twisted the ship the tentacles twisted with it, desperate to pull them back into the deadly forest. With the Yuuzhan Vong warriors anchoring him in place, Kol lashed out and cut through two more tentacles.

Wolf gave the ship one more powerful wrench, and it began to pull skyward. Kol heard an awful tearing sound as the sole tentacle still gripping the ship was torn in two. Its dying tip still coiled around the shuttle, too far away for Kol to reach.

"Pull me back in!" he shouted to the warriors as the shuttle began to rise. They hauled him back inside just as the ramp began to close.

They should have been climbing fast skyward, but Kol could feel the ship struggle to ascend. Ignoring the pain from his still-bleeding wounds, he pushed himself upright and staggered for the cockpit as quickly as he could.

As he approached he heard his son say, "Those vines damaged us bad, Master Sazen. Even if we can break atmosphere we aren't going to make orbit. Are we going to die, Master?"

"No. Not today, my apprentice." Wolf was struggling to sound confident. "Hit the rear thrusters and burn those vines off. If we can make it to the sky, the Force will guide us."

"And then what? Abandon the planet? Make a *liar* out of my father? Just let his dream die?"

"We have to survive first," Kol said as he stepped into the cockpit. He clamped his son on the shoulder and said, "Give us more burn from the engines."

Cade nodded uncertainly but worked the co-pilot's controls like he knew what he was doing. There was another rumble from the back of the ship, and another jerk, and then they lifted higher. The deadly forest fell away beneath them and they shot toward a starry sky, but Kol could tell the ship was still badly damaged.

"Can we get into orbit?" he asked Sazen.

"A few more bursts from the thrusters should work, but I don't know if we can *stay* there," the Zabrak shook his head. "Kol, the hyperdrive's fried."

"Can we fix it?"

"I don't know."

"Then I'll take a look at it. Just get us out of atmo and into orbit so we can call for help."

Kol whirled away from the cockpit. As he went back through the hold he quickly scanned the scene: the despondent shapers, the battered warriors, and one blue-skinned Twi'lek apprentice. All Shado's desperate determination was gone now. He looked like the frightened child he was.

“Apprentice Vao!” Kol barked. “With me!”

Shado nodded dumbly and did as he was told. On Kol’s orders he grabbed the toolbox from the maintenance closet and followed the Jedi Master to the access panel tucked against a bulkhead nearing the engine section. Once he pulled open the casing Kol saw that there wasn’t much he could do, but he nonetheless tried to clear off some of the black carbon scoring and see if any of the burnt-out equipment was salvageable.

Shado watched over his shoulder, anxious and helpless, until Kol asked “Do you have a comlink?”

The young Twi’lek fumbled through his orange jumpsuit until he found the small cylinder and switched it on. Kol called, “Wolf! Send a distress signal! It’s not looking good in here and I’m not sure how much longer we can keep it together.”

After a second, Sazen’s voice returned: “Distress signal activated.”

Kol shut off the link and was enwrapped in silence. The desperate energy that had fueled him since the escape from the shapers’ damutek, through the fight in the forest to the flight in the air, finally drained away, leaving an aching emptiness inside.

The emptiness was quick to fill, even in silence. He wondered how they could survive this. He wondered if the disaster on Wayland was being repeated on other Vong-formed worlds, and if so, how many. He wondered if the experiment on Ossus, which had transformed the barren desert into a world lush with life, was similarly doomed. He wondered who would be blamed. He wondered what the repercussions would be.

He wondered if everything he’d ever done in his life had been for nothing.

“Master Skywalker,” a voice said behind him, soft and trembling.

Kol drew in breath, straightened, and looked back at Shado Vao. “Yes, apprentice?”

“What do we do now?”

“Trust in the Force,” Kol said. The platitude had never sounded weaker, so he added, “Pray, apprentice. Pray there’s someone out there who can save us.”

The single starship slipping out of Duro’s nightside shadow caught new sunlight and gleamed like a polished emerald. Its color, its wide-stretched wings and curving organic hull, marked it as having been not cobbled together in a factory but grown among the shipyard crèche of Zonama Sekot. The living craft looked almost like a soaring bird as it ascended to the outer limits of the planet’s orbit, gliding peacefully against a backdrop of stars and Duro’s green crescent.

Inside the ship, it was anything but peaceful. Though it was propelled soundlessly through space by its Yuuzhan Vong-grown dovin basals, the whole ship rattled from the residual friction of its escape from the planet’s atmosphere. Noises from the rear cabin- mutters and shouts from panicked refugees, cries from the wounded- reverberated up toward the cockpit, where two Yuuzhan Vong warriors sat at the forward viewport. Command hoods covered their faces and connected via umbilical cords to the ship’s main nervous system as they directed the flyer toward the stars.

They weren’t alone in orbit. Khat Lah could see that as he hunched between the pilots, one hand on the other’s shoulder. Against the starfield he could trace the moving lights of starship thrusters. They seemed to be growing brighter and closer; they also seemed like they were maneuvering to intercept.

“Vua Yaght, report,” Khat Lah said. “How many ships ahead?”

“Twelve,” the other warrior growled beneath his hood. “They are drawing closer.”

“Are they attempting to contact us?”

“Not yet- wait.” Vua Yaght paused while the Sekotan vessel transcribed the electric signals from the starships ahead. “They are calling on us to halt and be boarded.”

“Under whose authority? No, contact their lead ship so we may speak to them directly.”

“I will try.”

The lights from the ships ahead grew faintly brighter, but Khat Lah still couldn't tell what type or how well-armed. The Sekotan ship was unarmed entirely; the local Duros government had insisted that no armed Yuuzhan Vong be permitted on their world for the entirety of the reclamation project. They'd agreed to overlook the fact that Khat Lah and the two warriors piloting this shuttle could battle and kill most beings with their bare hands, but it was surely on their minds now. If they did board this shuttle, they'd be sure to treat the Yuuzhan Vong as hostiles. After what had happened on Duro- the inexplicable, disastrous results of their years-long terraforming project- that was guaranteed.

The Duros would want revenge for a world despoiled twice over, and not even a Jedi would be able to calm them if they boarded. A Jedi might successfully stall for time, though, and as Vua Yaght struggled for a direct communication, Khat Lah ducked into the back cabin to look for help.

Three of the four Jedi who'd been on Duro had escaped with their lives. One of those was badly injured and might soon die; another, a healer, was trying to manage all the wounded they'd pulled aboard their shuttle before fleeing the planet. Many were Yuuzhan Vong shapers; others were Alliance scientists and volunteer Duros settlers who's joined their noble effort.

Khat Lah spotted the Jedi he knew best, a dark-haired and bearded human name Reikar Horn. The knight was currently crouched over the form of his son: a stout five-year-old child whose face was blank with shock but appeared otherwise uninjured.

"*Jeedai* Horn," Khat Lah called, "We need your assistance!"

Horn looked up at the Yuuzhan Vong, then back to his son. He squeezed the child's hand and reluctantly got to his feet. He followed Khat Lah into the cockpit, where Vua Yaght reported in his own tongue, "We've made contact with a lead ship."

"Put it on a villip," Khat Lah replied in the same, then told the Jedi in Basic, "They are arraying to block our passage. Can you speak to them?"

A human face, a Jedi face, would soothe them far more than a Yuuzhan Vong's, even though Khat Lah's was bereft of the ritual scarring earlier generations had practiced.

Vua Yaght plucked the soft, fist-sized orb of a villip from the wall and handed it to the Jedi. Most non-Yuuzhan Vong would have flinched to touch the thing, but Horn had spent the past year on Duro, helping the shapers' terraforming project, and he was no stranger to Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology.

At Horn's touch, the villip's gelatinous surface formed into the imitation of a flat, nose-less face with large featureless eyes. The lipless mouth moved and the villip relayed the words of the speaking Duros: "You will stand down and prepare to be boarded at once."

"As you can tell, we have no place to stand down *from*," Horn said. "Our ship has no weapons."

"You will prepare to be boarded," the Duros repeated.

"My name is Reikar Horn, Jedi Knight. To whom am I speaking?"

"I am Ren Burr, captain of the *Swift Justice*."

"Is that an Alliance vessel?"

"We have requested Alliance assistance. Their ships will be here shortly."

"But you're *not* an Alliance vessel." Horn glanced at the lights out the viewport. "Are *any* of your ships Alliance?"

"We are independent citizens defending our homeworld."

"Then you have no authority to interdict us." Horn stroked the top of the villip lightly, silencing his connection without severing it. He asked the pilots, "When can we make the jump to lightspeed?"

"We cannot make a jump to Ossus from this vector," Besh Lah reported.

"It doesn't matter. Just get us out of this system. We can plot a course later. How long?"

"Forty seconds until we leave the gravity well, but they are closing formation fast."

"Just get us out of here." Horn stroked the villip again and told Ren Burr, "We will be happy to speak to Alliance authorities, but you have no jurisdiction over us."

“How many Vong are aboard your ship?” the Duros snapped.

“We have beings of many races here.”

“We won’t hold the Jedi responsible for this- yet. Hand over the Vong and we’ll let the rest of you go.”

To some beings it would be a tempting offer. Khat Lah had spent the past two years away from Zonama Sekot, interacting with species from the larger galaxy, many of whom had lost entire planets to the Yuuzhan Vong invasion a century ago. He understood the anger many of them still felt toward his race, and the burning desire for justice that could so easily transition to vengeance.

As a member of the Ganner Sect, a warrior’s cult that had grown strong in the generations since the war, he’d been instilled with a deep faith in the wisdom and bravery of the Jedi Knights, whom the invading generation had so foolishly treated like enemies.

He trusted Reikar Horn to do the right thing, and was wholly unsurprised when the Jedi said, “I’m sorry, but I must emphatically decline your offer. As you have no authority and no good reason to detain us, I’m afraid I must terminate this call.”

Horn stroked the villip down its side to terminate the call and return the orbit to its blank state. “How much longer?” he asked Besh Lah.

“They’ve cut off our main escape vector,” the warrior said through his cowl. “We will have to break past them.”

“We have no weapons,” Khat Lah reminded.

“We will have to fly around them.”

As if on cue, the Sekotan flyer pulled hard to port, then dipped to starboard. The lights from the approaching Duros ships were close, and Khat Lah could make out some details of their angular grey hulls. Two years ago one mechanical vessel had seemed the same as another, but he’d learned to differentiate their designs. These ones were of different types, larger than their own but far smaller than Alliance warships. Many were disc-shaped, probably of Corellian design. He was watching one cut ahead of their flyer when spears of plasma flashed out of its ventral gun-turrets.

They barely had to move to evade it, but the Corellian ship dove closer. "They're trying to box us in," Horn said. "That was the warning shot."

Besh Lah threw the ship into another tight maneuver, trying to shake off the shooter. As the Corellian ship kept on them tight another one, boxy and angular and unfamiliar, stuck hard on their flank.

"They are trying to pin us inside the gravity well," Besh Lah said, exasperated. "I cannot break free..."

"Just keep trying," Horn insisted. "I don't think-"

The entire ship trembled as its defensive dovin basals swallowed a stream of laserfire on their starboard side. The ship on their port fired as well, and though Besh Lah twisted them in a dizzying maneuver he couldn't evade the plasma-burst that tore off the end of their long wing.

Khat Lah heard Besh Lah and Vua Yaght gasp beneath their cognition hoods as the living flyer shared some of its agony with the pilots. He looked out the viewport and saw the flare of another ship's engines as it settled right ahead of them.

"We are boxed in," Besh Lah hissed through his pain. "There is... no way out..."

Khat Lah glanced back at the main cabin, at the wounded Yuuzhan Vong and Jedi Knights and scientists from a half-dozen species crammed together. When the *Swift Justice* and its allies boarded they'd bring just that; fast, deadly retribution for what the Duros wrongly assumed was yet another Yuuzhan Vong attack on their homeworld. Even the Jedi might not be safe.

Realization came to Khat Lah in an instant. He plucked the villip from Reikar Horn's hand and ran his palm over it. The image of the flat-faced Duro captain appeared again.

"I am Khat Lah, warrior of the Yuuzhan Vong and architect of our actions on your world," he said. The last part was pure lie- he was a member of his caste, and a young one, just chief of the handful of warriors assigned to guard the shapers on Duro. But right now, a lie was needed. "I will leave this ship and surrender myself to you if you let the others go."

Horn's jaw opened to say something but Khat Lah held up a hand. "Will you let them pass? You will have to destroy this ship otherwise. I offer myself as a sacrifice."

He could see indecision wrench the Duros's face, but eventually Ren Burr said, "Only when we have you in our possession."

"As long as you let them go, I will surrender peacefully. If you do not," he growled, bearing teeth, "I will not."

He shut off the connection and handed the villip to Vua Yaght, who said, "Warrior, you honor us with your sacrifice."

"Go with the gods." Khat Lah snapped a salute, forearms crossed, wrists against shoulders. Vua Yaght and Besh Lah returned it. Then he turned and hurried out of the cockpit. Yuuzhan Vong warriors were never long on goodbyes.

As expected, Reikar Horn followed him into the cabin. Dozens of questioning eyes followed them as they made their way through the crowd, down the narrow access corridor that led to the dorsal airlock.

Once they had privacy Horn said, "You can't do this, Khat Lah. I won't let you."

It was as he expected. "There is nothing you can do for us, *Jeedai*. Do not worry. I am prepared for my fate." He wanted it to be true, but it wasn't. Warriors were supposed to face death without fear, but deep down Khat Lah was terrified. He told himself this was necessary, this was good, this was noble, and it was all true, but there was still fear and he was ashamed of it.

"There are other ways out of this," Horn insisted.

"No, there are not," Khat Lah said.

When they reached the pressurization chamber leading to the airlock he tapped the panel on the door, sliding it open. A door inside the chamber opened on a supply closet where several vacuum-proof suits were kept. All of them were of Alliance make, a mix of organic fabrics and mechanical contraptions. The thought of dying in one was unpleasant, but Khat Lah pulled a suit out from the closet anyway.

Horn stepped into the chamber with him and insisted, one last time, "You *don't* have to do this."

Khat Lah breathed deep and looked the Jedi in the eye. "Among my sect, we revere no one more than the *Jeedai* Ganner, who stood bravely against thousands of Yuuzhan Vong and fought until they killed him, all so his *Jeedai* friend could escape. There is no higher act that sacrifice."

"It doesn't have to be yours," Horn said.

"We both know it does, *Jeedai*."

Horn bowed his head in defeat, nodded, and took a step toward the chamber exit.

Then he locked one arm around Khat Lah and pulled, throwing the larger warrior off-balance. Khat Lah dropped the suit and raised both arms defensively but Horn released him, jump-stepped back, and raised one foot for a strong forward kick that sent the Yuuzhan Vong stumbling out of the airlock vestibule and back into the access corridor.

Before Khat Lah could spin around, Reikar Horn closed the chamber door. With a snap of the fingers and a touch of his invisible Force, he turned the door's control panel to a shower of sparks.

"*Jeedai!*" Khat Lah pounded on the door's porthole window. "What are you doing?"

"Tell the pilots to run as soon as I'm off the ship." Horn shouted to be heard through the thick door. "I don't *think* they'll kill me... So watch over Eli until I return. And if I don't... Tell him I did what I could."

"*Jeedai* Horn!"

Khat Lah pounded on the door, but all he could do was watch as Horn stuffed himself into the vacuum suit. Before sealing his helmet the Jedi looked at him through the window, smiled faintly, and raised his voice for one more shout.

"We all have to do our part, my friend, and this is mine."

Then Reikar Horn sealed his vacuum suit and turned toward the heavy airlock doors. Khat Lah watched, frustrated and helpless and angry at the Jedi for stealing his glory but also, deep down, relieved. He watched the Jedi's back as he checked his suit over one last time, then watched as the airlock's mouth swung open and Reikar Horn's vac-suited body burst out on a gust of air. It drifted toward the stars, and a Duro ship swooping close.

Khat Lah pushed himself away and sprinted for the cockpit. When he got there Vua Yaght stared at him, confused. "What has happened?"

"The *Jeedai* went out instead," the warrior hissed. "Are the ships breaking formation?"

"The lead one is breaking off to seize the *Jeedai*," Besh Lah reported.

"Can we slip through?"

"I think so."

There was no time for doubt or guilt or hesitation; a split-second's delay might waste the Jedi's gift. "Do it now."

The Sekotan flyer wrenched hard to port. It rolled out between two Duros ships, then nimbly dodged a volley of laserfire before breaking into a fast, clear shot for the edge of the gravity well. Laserfire still whipped past their ship as a few Duros gave pursuit.

"When can we jump?" asked Khat Lah as he clung to his domain-mate's chair.

Besh Lah's answer came with a flash of light as the flier lurched into darkspace, leaving Duro far behind.

Less than a minute later, they reverted to normal space and the pilots began plotting a precise course back to Ossus. Khat Lah felt so emptied he could barely stand, but he shuffled back into the cabin, where all the survivors stared at him expectantly.

The Yuuzhan Vong warrior took a deep breath and said, "We have escaped Duro and are on course for Ossus."

He could see relief in most of their faces, but not in that of the five-year-old boy strapped into a crash seat in the far corner of the room. Seeing the question in the child's eyes, Khat Lah stepped around prone bodies to reach him.

"Where's my father?" the boy asked. Big, blue-green eyes stared up at the Yuuzhan Vong, pleading. Eli, Khat Lah recalled. This human child, this Jedi's child, was named Eli Horn.

Yuuzhan Vong warriors were trained for many things, but not comfort. Awkwardly he crouched down and put a large hand on the boy's small shoulder. "Your father stayed behind. But he will be back. And I..."

He tried to remember his last words to Reikar Horn. He couldn't. He'd been so set on sacrificing himself that the sudden reversal had left him gibbering and confounded. He'd not even managed to thank his savior.

Khat Lah squeezed the boy's shoulder and said, "I will watch over you, young *Jeedai*. I swear it."

Salvation came and it was not what they expected. Their hyperdrive was irreparable and their thrust engines were dead but the shuttle's sensors were not. The control board lit up to announce the arrival of a sleek wedge-shaped Imperial star destroyer.

Momentum carried them in a dying orbit over Wayland. From high above the planet looked the same green-blue, mockingly peaceful and unchanged. It had been growing closer, swelling ever-wider beneath them, when the star destroyer's tractor beam locked on and began reeling them into its ventral landing bay.

As the flat gray expanse of the destroyer's lower hull filled their view, blocking out black space and bright planet, Kol finally allowed himself a breath of relief.

"We're getting another hail from the destroyer," Sazen said from the pilot's seat. "They're offering to help with any repairs."

"Tell them we're extremely grateful for anything they'll provide." Kol sagged against the back of the co-pilot's seat, where Cade was also flush with relief.

Sazen checked his board again. "They said the commanding officer is coming down to meet us in the landing bay."

Unusual, Kol thought. Most Imperial captains expected you to come to them, at which point they *might* give you the favor of an audience. He looked down at himself: his bare chest, still dirty, bearing dozens of cuts and slashing scrape-marks from their violent escape. They still gleamed with the palmfuls of fresh bacta he'd slapped on minutes before, when Sazen had announced that a ship was coming for them. Before then, when it looked like they'd burn up in Wayland's atmosphere, there'd seemed no point.

"I suppose I should clean up before I thank him," Kol muttered.

Sazen's eyes narrowed as he checked his readout. "*Her*, I believe. Moff Nyna Calixte. I wonder what a moff was doing around here."

Kol barely heard Sazen's last words. One name had erased everything, even the terrible memory and awful repercussion of Wayland's ruin. He looked down at the crown of Cade's head, a bush of messy blond hair. His mother's name meant nothing to him. It meant nothing to Sazen either, but then, the woman Kol had married, all those years ago, had gone by another name at the time.

"Cade, Wolf, get Shado and do a thorough inventory or all our damage. Find out what parts and equipment we'll need to get back to Ossus."

"Do we *want* to go back to Ossus?" asked Cade.

Kol blinked; the specter of Morrigan Corde had made him forget the most basic facts. The shuttle's long-range comm was out and there was no way to know whether the Vong-forming on the Jedi world had gone as disastrously as it had on Wayland.

"We'll utilize the Imperials' long-range transmitter and see what's going on," Kol said, and dreaded what they might learn. "Cade, Wolf, do as I said. Get Shado to help. And... keep the Yuuzhan Vong aboard the shuttle. The Imperials won't react kindly toward them."

"Understood," Sazen nodded. "What about you, Master?"

"I'll go meet with our rescuer. Wolf, lower the landing ramp."

Without another word, Kol turned and marched out of the cockpit. As he stalked toward the hold and the lowering ramp, Cade called behind him, "Dad? I thought you were cleaning up."

Kol ignored him. He stepped down the ramp and onto the clean, cool deck of the star destroyer. The recycled air chilled the fresh bacta on his torso and back. The approaching Imperial repair crews stopped to stare at the dirty, battered, bare-chested Jedi who'd appeared in front of them.

They paused for only a moment. The Imperials parted and a woman stepped into view. Were it not for her unmistakable aura in the Force, Kol wouldn't have recognized her. She wore an olive-gray uniform, typically Imperial. Her eyes were blue now and her hair was black, pulled up into a tight martial bun at the back of her head. Even her face, which should have been harder to change, looked older, lined and gaunt. Strict and severe, like an Imperial moff should.

She stepped up close and looked him over, then said loud enough for her crew to hear, "You are fortunate, Master Jedi, that we were on maneuvers in the area."

"Yes, the Force was with us." Kol kept his voice steady.

She took a step closer and lowered her voice for him alone. "The Force or just your seemingly endless luck, Kol Skywalker?"

Being with her like this, after everything else he'd been through today, was too much. Struggling to keep his frustration and anger in control, Kol bent close and whispered, "Is this who you fled me to become, Morrigan? Or is it who you always *were*?"

Her voice dropped lower. "This is who I am now, Kol. Please. Don't betray me."

"I would never do that." He felt a nudge in the Force and knew Cade had come down the ramp to watch them. "Your son misses you. Would you like to speak to him?"

She dared twist her neck, just a bit, and look past Kol's shoulder at the boy standing beneath the shuttle. Messy blonde hair, tattered orange jumpsuit, confusion and desperation in his eyes. She could only bear it for a second.

"Your son," she said. "*Morrigan's* son. Not mine. I am Nyna Calixte."

"You've made a new life for yourself, my love, but you can never fully escape who you were. No one can." She turned her back to him. He bent forward, breath on her neck. "Someday you *will* have to face Cade and tell him the truth."

She lowered her head and looked at her boots. "Not today, Kol. Don't you have *enough* problems to deal with?"

Her words grounded him. "Yes. We do. Something disastrous has happened on Wayland. The terraforming

project has... become something monstrous. I need to warn the Jedi before it happens on other worlds.”

She raised a black eyebrow. “And you require my communications system to do it?”

“Ours was damaged.” If he called Ossus using Imperial equipment the Imperials would keep a record of everything he said. He didn’t want that, but he had no choice. Even now, other worlds might be disfiguring like Wayland.

“Very well.” She pivoted and told her staff, “Give the Jedi all the help they require. Master Skywalker will come with me.”

She gave him no option except to follow. Most of the Imperials went toward the shuttle, where Cade and Sazen were waiting, but a four-set of white-armored stormtroopers fell in behind Kol and the woman who’d saved him. Whether it was her intent or not, they certainly made him feel like a prisoner. As they moved through the destroyer’s pale metal corridors they drew stares from every passing Imperial. Kol could read their emotions in the Force, a stew of confusion and curiosity. Most of them had no idea what they were doing in this system or what had happened down on Wayland. He wondered whether, once they knew the truth, they’d pity the Jedi for their failure or hate them for it.

It might all depend on what was happening on the other Vongformed worlds. When they reached the entrance to the communications chamber, the moff waved her four bodyguards aside, stepped through the threshold, and beckoned only Kol to follow. When the door closed behind him, he was alone with the woman he’d loved for the first time in over a decade.

Neither of them wanted to savor it. She went over to the communications console and tapped its controls. “I assume you have an encrypted frequency you use for Jedi Council business.” Her eyes were on the console, not him. “You can input it now.”

He’d hoped that, once alone, she’d drop the stern mask of Nyna Calixte and show some of the woman he’d married. But nothing changed; it was another crushing blow, as strong as any he’d received this day.

Kol went over to the console and typed in his long alphanumeric key. She stepped to the corner of the room but didn't leave or bother giving him the pretense of privacy. It was, he thought, more honest than most things she'd done.

Kol sent a hail to Ossus and waited with held breath. The response was swift, and he found himself looking at the slightly-blurred image of his relative, Arlen Fel. Through the holo the venerable Jedi Master's face was rendered in shades of blue, lightening to white to mark his hair and beard.

"We're glad you're alright, Kol," Arlen said, but there was no happiness in his voice. "When we heard about Wayland we all feared the worst."

"Our shuttle was badly damaged during takeoff. We're receiving help now. From an Imperial star destroyer."

"I see." Arlen's white brows drew together. "Interesting the Imperials should have a ship like that so close to Wayland. That's well past the edge of their territory."

Arlen Fel was an old man in his eighties, but he'd never been a fool. Even if he didn't know Kol's ex-wife was in the room listening, he knew the Imperials would be recording this conversation.

"It *is* interesting," Kol agreed. "We'll have to investigate why the Imperials were so close to Wayland, but right now I'm grateful for the save. Tell me, what's happened to the other Vongformed worlds?"

Arlen exhaled. "I think you've already seen it."

"As bad as Wayland?"

Arlen nodded grimly.

"How many worlds?"

"Nearly all of them."

"Ossus?"

"Not that we can tell. Everything on Ossus, the entire new biosphere.... It seems unaffected."

"That makes no sense. Ossus was the planet we *tested* the Vongforming process on. It was the first experiment. What we used on the other worlds was a refinement of what already worked on Ossus."

"I have no explanation for you. Did Nei Rin and her shapers survive?"

“They’re with me.”

“We’ll need their help to figure out what went wrong. Make sure they get back to Ossus safe. Don’t let the Imperials get a hold of them.”

Kol resisted the urge to turn a warning glare on the woman behind him. “I won’t.”

“Do you know how long it will be before you reach Ossus?” asked Arlen.

“Several days, probably. We’ll need heavy repairs. Maybe a whole new ship. Are you convening the Jedi Council?”

“Master K’Kruhk is. I’m on way to Coruscant to try and explain this to Alliance.” Arlen looked like he wanted to say more- maybe list off the locations of the current Council members- but he stopped himself from telling the Imperials too much. “Come to Ossus soon, Kol. We need your guidance more than ever.”

That hit him like a punch to the chest. His *guidance* had brought them here. He’d pushed the Jedi Council to enact his lifelong dream of using Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology to reclaim devastated worlds, He’d believed it would redeem the former invaders and solidify the Jedi Order’s position as galactic peacemakers. Instead his good intentions had wrought horrors he’d never expected, horrors that would only increase as news spread across the stars.

His guidance may have doomed them all.

But if this ruin was his fault, it was also his responsibility to salvage it. Kol drew in breath and said, “I’ll let you know once we’ve resumed our course.”

“We’ll be waiting,” Arlen nodded. Without fanfare, the holo winked out.

Kol gathered his thoughts for a long moment before turning around. His ex-wife leaned against the back wall, arms crossed over the chest of her drab Imperial uniform, face set into an unreadable scowl.

“The Council will be expecting me,” he said. “I’d like to be under way as soon as possible.”

“You’ve made a mess of things, haven’t you?”

She’d always been painfully blunt. “I have to clean it up. Somehow.”

"You didn't tell me you have Vong aboard your ship. You should have warned me. My crew won't react well to a surprise like that."

"They're not to harm the Yuuzhan Vong in any way."

"You trust these shapers?"

"I have known Nei Rin since we were children on Zonama Sekot. I trust her absolutely."

Far more, he thought, than I trust you.

It was a bitter realization, but not a surprise. He'd fallen in love with Morrigan Corde in part because she was mysterious, an Imperial agent who played by rules utterly unknown to the Jedi. Danger was alluring to a young man. Kol had hoped that in getting married and in having a son he'd tame her and lead her on to a more righteous path. Maybe he'd been inspired by the stories of his great-grandfather Luke, who'd saved and ultimately married the Imperial assassin meant to kill him.

He'd been a fool to think he could change her. Maybe he'd never been anything but a fool, in every way.

"I should get down to my ship," Kol said stiffly. His eyes locked on hers. They didn't look away but they didn't soften either.

"My guards will take you back to the hangar," she said.

Kol didn't move for the door. "Master Fel brought up a good point. That an Imperial star destroyer would be this close to Wayland- an Alliance planet, at this time- is rather extraordinary. That *you*'d be the one commanding it... Well, I have a hard time taking that for coincidence."

Her arms stayed crossed over her chest. "It is. I've just finished a meeting at Ord Lithone. We were patrolling the border on our way back to the Braxant sector and picked up your distress call. Believe it or not."

Kol didn't, but there was no point in trying to pry truth from her. Even when they'd been married, she'd kept too many secrets. "I'll be on my way, then. Thank you for rescuing us, Morrigan."

He'd meant it as a parting barb. He caught the hint of a restrained wince, but she recovered quickly. "Good day, Master Skywalker."

He nodded and stepped through the door, leaving her behind. There was nothing more to say.

After Kol left, it took Nyna Calixte a minute to compose herself.

When she'd ordered the crew of her star destroyer to respond to the distress call from Wayland, she'd expected, even hoped, to find her ex-husband there. She'd braced herself to see his face again after so long and fortified herself with the knowledge that her life with Kol- what it had been, what it could have been- was all a long time gone, and one brief encounter now couldn't undo the progress she'd made in remaking herself.

So it wasn't Kol that had unsettled her, not really. She'd let her gaze fall on her son for only a moment, but that image, glimpsed over Kol's battered shoulder, stayed with her when she closed her eyes: a boy in a battered orange jumpsuit, messy blonde hair matted with sweat, face haggard with exhaustion and residual terror, eyes wide with curiosity as he watched his father talk to a stranger in an Imperial moff's uniform.

If Cade was half as strong with the Force as his father, he'd have surely felt *something*, even if he didn't understand it.

For that brief moment of looking at her son she'd felt the urge to tell him everything: who she was, why she'd fallen in love with his father, why she'd walked away and why she'd remade herself into what she was now: Nyna Calixte, moff and deputy director of Imperial Intelligence, advisor to His Majesty Roan Fel.

Looking at Cade had made her weak and she couldn't afford to be weak, now or ever. She was glad to be alone. She didn't plan on seeing Kol face-to-face before he departed, and she guessed he had no plans to talk to her again. Kol had much bigger problems than her right now.

Likewise, she had more important things to do that turn maudlin over might-have-beens. She turned her attention to the communications console and worked the controls. Using her executive override codes, she shut down the recording devices that had just captured Kol's conversation with the

emperor's uncle. Then she entered another encryption key, even more complicated than the Jedi's, and sent her private hail.

She waited four tense minutes before an image appeared in front of her. The face was a human male's, pale and dark-haired, plain and remarkably unremarkable. She wasn't sure it was a real face at all. She'd only ever had these talks by holo and the image could easily be some computer-generated mask.

"We are in the Wayland system now," Calixte said. "The Vongforming project has taken a disastrous turn, as you predicted."

"Are you above Wayland itself?"

"That's right."

"So you crossed the border into Alliance territory."

"Legally. We answered a distress call. It's given us an opportunity to collect excellent sensor readings on what's happening. I was planning to dispatch a few away teams to get a closer look at the surface. I'd be happy to share our initial data with you."

Her client wouldn't be distracted. "A distress call from whom?"

No point in lying; there weren't many beings who'd be fleeing Wayland. "A shuttle containing Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong shapers."

The face went blank as her client considered a response. It was moments like this when she was sure she was talking to a computer-generated façade.

Eventually her client said, "Let the Jedi go on their way."

"I had no legal basis to hold them." She kept her voice stiff to conceal relief. Her client never ordered her to do anything, only suggested, but she'd been afraid it would suggest she kill Kol and her son. That was something not even Nyna Calixte would do.

"Collect all the data you can on Wayland," her client said. "We would appreciate a look at whatever you can share."

"I'll be sure to oblige. Naturally, Emperor Fel will see our data as well."

"Naturally," the client agreed.

She stared at that blank face, and it stared back. Pauses like these were the most unsettling. When the client had first contacted her several months ago she'd thought it was some strange prank, or a test of loyalties by the emperor, but that kind of subterfuge wasn't Roan Fel's style. When the client had suggested- always suggested- that she take a star destroyer and patrol near Wayland, she'd made an excuse and done so, all the while wondering what surprise lay in store. Now that question was answered, and it raised many more.

"We are sure the emperor will appreciate the information you'll give him," the client said. "He'll appreciate *you*."

"As well he should." Roan Fel was no master of manipulation but he wasn't a fool either. He'd trust Calixte as much as she trusted her mysterious benefactor. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. The Empire is in your debt. I'll attach our orbital readings to the end of this data-stream."

"We are grateful. Please contact us again when you've gathered more complete information."

"Of course. I look forward to our next conversation. Is there anything else?"

"Not for the moment."

"Very well. Goodbye for now." With a few taps on the console, Calixte uploaded the destroyer's first round of sensor-scans, sent them through the stream, then killed the signal.

The blank face disappeared, but she scowled at the dark air where it had just been. Calixte would never trust anyone without a name or real face, but she'd play along until she found out her client's secrets- and found a way to use them. And then she'd get rid of them.

That was what she did, use and discard, as Nyna Calixte and Morrigan Corde both. Kol had never understood that, but then, Jedi rarely did. Their mystic Force wrapped them up in lofty lies and prevented them from recognizing how the galaxy worked. It was why, despite all their good intentions and noble aims, they did as much harm as good. They were always victims of their own delusions.

There were none of those for Nyna Calixte. Kol Skywalker, the son and the life he'd represented, were distractions. They'd never been anything else. She'd be relieved once he was gone.

Chapter Two

The first explosions burst like gold flowers over the bronze curve of Terminus' daylit side. Seen from a distance they were a beautiful sight, not just for the vividness of their color but for the fact that they marked the commencement of the planet's long-awaited conquest.

For Relik K'sharn and the Nagai armies he commanded, there was nothing more beautiful than this.

Tall and lean humanoids, recognizable for their pure-white skin and black hair, the Nagai race hailed from a distant star cluster and had been honed by their enemies into a society of warriors. Over a century ago, they'd been chased from their homeworld into the territory of the then-nascent New Republic. They'd fought hard to secure some worlds for themselves on the galaxy's Outer Rim, then reluctantly submitted to the Republic. Over time, as generations passed, they had settled into a peaceful existence. They'd started to forget the old ways.

Relik K'sharn was set on changing that. Over the past two years his armies had swept across the Saijo sector, seizing worlds for the Nagai. Terminus was the center of the neighboring Kallea Sector, and unlike the sparsely-populated backwaters the Nagai had conquered thus far, it was a hub of industry and trade. The Galactic Alliance, sitting distant on Coruscant, would not be able to ignore this conquest.

For the moment, Terminus' meager defense fleet was all that stood in front of the Nagai. From the bridge of his flagship *K'dath*, the warlord watched his forces engage the

locals. To the Terminus defenders, the Nagai fleet must have looked like a hodgepodge collection of cobbled-together ships, no two of the same design. Their attacks were fast and fierce with no discernable strategy save a succession of hit-and-runs that left the defenders beleaguered and the Nagai barely scathed.

It was the way the Nagai had fought last century when they'd menaced the New Republic. K'sharn had studied the old conquests and learned everything he could from them. The more difficult task had been gathering the Nagai clans, soft from over a hundred years of peace, and forging them into a killing force. Many had told him it couldn't be done, but K'sharn never doubted he'd succeed. From childhood he'd possessed a sense of destiny, inexplicable given his low-caste birth, but he'd followed it unerringly. He'd found it easy to read the emotions of other Nagai, and by sensing their doubts and convictions he'd been able to manipulate them as needed. He enjoyed the manipulation just as he enjoyed the beautiful explosions now flashing constantly over Terminus. An entire fleet was his to command, thousands and thousands of lives his to spare or destroy. He never felt more alive than during moments like these.

"Captain," he called to the *K'dath's* commanding officer, "Tell our fleet group to prepare to engage. We shouldn't let the other clans claim all the victory."

"Gladly, warlord," the captain said. K'sharn could feel the bridge crew bristle with energy. The battle was going well, and like their warlord, they wanted to claim their piece of it.

As K'sharn surveyed the tactical display, deciding where to strike next, a spread of yellow markers appeared at the edge of Terminus' orbit. The markers flashed and turned red, and the ship's captain reported, "Warlord, a Galactic Alliance fleet has just entered the system."

K'sharn crossed his arms over his chest. "Just as expected. Captain, we have our target. Tell the fleet group to engage at will."

The Nagai that fell on the newly-arrived Alliance fleet attacked with impressive ferocity. Their strange, miss-

matched ships swarmed like piranha-beetles against the larger force, hitting and running and hitting again. It was an impressive performance that turned the tactical display aboard the flagship *Indomitable* into a dizzying mess of ever-moving reds and greens, but they'd studied the Nagai's attack strategies before coming here and devised a counter-measure.

Captain Jaius Yorub really, really hoped it worked. He glanced away from the holo at the fleet's commander, Admiral Gar Stazi. The tall green-skinned Duro had his eyes on the forward viewport. Space ahead of their MC140 *Scythe*-class cruiser was a constant riot of explosive bursts. Right now, the Alliance ships' powerful shields were absorbing most of the Nagai attacks, but they'd wear down in time.

Stazi turned away from the viewport and told his Sullustan captain, "Have all capital ships tighten formation, maximum level. Begin launching all starfighters."

"Yes, sir," Yorub said, and quickly relayed the orders.

Admiral Stazi was one of the Alliance's most capable officers, and Yorub was proud to serve under him, but sometimes he could be aggravatingly unpredictable. The battle plan, as they'd discussed it earlier, had been to pull their capital ships into a dangerously tight formation that would give the Nagai little space to maneuver between them, and to do it fast, before the Nagai could engage. The battle group that had fallen on them had done it lightning-fast, and Stazi had let the fighting start before giving the order to close formation. Whether that delay would help or hinder them, Yorub didn't know.

With the Nagai ships already thick between them, the Alliance vessels had a difficult time tightening formation. The Nagai seemed to spot their strategy and did their best to prevent their movement, but as Yorub watched the tactical holo he saw the swarms of starfighters spilling out of the Alliance ships rush to engage. Nagai ships were fast and maneuverable, but by keeping between the Alliance vessels they'd effectively boxed themselves in. The Alliance starfighters- a mix of CF9 Crossfire interceptors, X-38

Twintail space superiority fighters, and old D-wing bombers—had an easy time taking down the Nagai ships. One by one, red markers winked out on the holo-display, and the Alliance started closing the gaps in formation while the depleted Nagai withdrew to a position outside the Alliance fleet.

Admiral Stazi had done it again. “I just wish you’d tell me in advance,” the Sullustan muttered to the taller Duro.

Stazi favored with captain with a tight smile. “There was nothing to tell. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

Stazi had a lot of those. It made for generally good results in battle but didn’t do much for Yorub’s peace of mind. Still a favorable trade, even if it didn’t always feel like one.

With the capital ships pulled close together they’d essentially forced the Nagai to lay siege on a stationary target, something their ships were ill-suited for. On the admiral’s orders, the starfighters held position around the edges of the Alliance formation, defending against Nagai attacks but refusing to take the bait and chase them away from friendly lines.

“This could drag on for a long time,” Yorub told the admiral.

“I’m aware, but at least we’ve split their forces.”

Yorub gestured to the tactical holo. “Most of the Nagai are still attacking the planet. We’re not in position to help them. Do you think it’s time to call in our friends?”

Stazi tapped his chin thoughtfully. “If the Nagai were going to call in reinforcements, I’d imagine they’d do so in the next few minutes. Let’s wait it out to see if they draw any in. Our ships can hold that long.”

“I’m not sure the Terminus ships can. If this fight goes bad, Admiral, they’ll blame us for not helping them like we’re supposed to.”

“I’m aware. My orders stand, Captain. Just a few more minutes.”

The Alliance advance toward the planet had been halted, but Relik K’sharn felt no hint of triumph. They’d balled up their heavy cruisers in a dangerously tight defensive formation, which had succeeded in neutralizing the Nagai’s

ability to perform fast hit-and-run attacks. Rather than charge forward toward Terminus and help the local defenders, the Alliance had elected to hold formation and position at the outer edge of the planet's orbit.

It was almost like they were waiting for something, K'sharn thought. No, they *were* waiting for reinforcements. It came to him in a flash, not intuition but simple knowledge, inexplicable but certain like a vision of the future. That kind of certainty came to K'sharn from time to time, usually in the heat of battle, and he'd learned not to doubt it. The only question was what to *do* with it.

He wouldn't play into the Alliance's hands and he wouldn't waste time. The main priority was to take Terminus, and if the Alliance wasn't going to engage him in outer orbit, he'd forced them to break formation and fight him closer to the planet.

"Captain!" he called, "Pull all ships back. Tell the entire battle group to reinforce the attack on Terminus."

"Yes, Warlord!"

The captain began relaying a series of specific orders and K'sharn turned his attention to the viewport. He watched as the formation of Alliance ships panned away and was replaced by stars, which was in turn replaced by the yellow-brown orb of Terminus. *K'dath* and the other Nagai ships accelerated toward it at maximum speed. Smaller vessels darted eagerly ahead of the flagship and joined the other Nagai ships in breaking what was left of Terminus' defenders.

K'sharn looked back at the tactical display. The Alliance ships were loosening formation as they accelerated to give chase, but still kept a fairly tight wedge. The Nagai ships were faster, and once the Alliance got close enough to engage they'd be forced to combat the combined strength of all the Nagai battle groups.

Then more fresh lights appeared on the holo, yellow flashing to red. They looked about as numerous as the hostiles giving chase. "More Alliance ships?" asked K'sharn.

"No, warlord." The tactical officer shook her head. "Our sensors mark them as *Imperial*."

K'sharn was not used to being surprised, and he struggled to keep the shock off his face. The so-called Galactic Empire was no longer galaxy-spanning, but it was neither the Imperial Remnant it had once been dubbed. Over the past forty years it had gradually expanded territory, not through conquest but by voluntarily luring systems away from the Alliance. This had produced increasing tension between Coruscant and Bastion, even though both governments were still nominal allies.

At this time its space was about one-third the size of the Alliance's, still a vast domain. Terminus, however, was on the exact opposite side of the galaxy from Imperial Space, and K'sharn had never expected them to form a cooperative pact with the Alliance, especially in a fight that was so far away and didn't involve them directly.

Apparently, the Empire was looking to expand its reputation as a galactic peacekeeper. It was the only explanation K'sharn could think of, and he couldn't allow himself to dwell on it any further. As the Alliance followed them back to Terminus the Imperials were cutting in from an angle. They'd clearly planned to interpose themselves between K'sharn's battle group and the ones closer to the planet, but now they had no choice but to join the fight over Terminus. Nagai, local, Alliance, and Imperial ships would all be tossed together in a gigantic brawl.

Those were the kinds of battles the Nagai were good at. They were the kind K'sharn savored. He spun to face his bridge crew and called, "All ships, full ahead! Let them chase us! Let them come! We are Nagai warriors and we will smash whatever they throw at us!"

He drew the ceremonial knife from his belt and stabbed it at the ceiling. The crew pumped fists and cheered, enraptured by just a few words. He could almost feel his enthusiasm, his battle-lust, bleeding into the hearts of his crew. Relik K'sharn smiled hungrily and turned back to the viewport to watch the battle unfold.

When discussing how to stop the Nagai offensive at Terminus, Admiral Stazi and his Imperial counterpart had

considered at length the best way to deal with the fast, chaotic attacks the Outer Rim raiders were known for. They'd agreed to try and split the Nagai into smaller battle groups and overwhelm the separate pieces with superior firepower. The last thing they wanted was for their two fleets- crewed by beings unfamiliar with eachothers' tactics- to be thrown together and forced to fight to Nagai in one big frenzy.

That was, unfortunately, exactly what had happened. It was easy enough for the Imperial and Alliance ships to tell each other apart- organic-looking Mon Calamari cruisers and wedge-shaped star destroyers were hard to miss- but once they were drawn into the same zone to fight the same enemy, all coherent tactics broke down. TIE Predators and Crossfires nearly collided as they chased Nagai fighters. One saber-toothed Mon Cal frigate accidentally sprayed an Imperial counterpart with a broadside turbolaser volley while both tried to squeeze out a nimble Nagai corvette.

Part of the problem, Jaius Yorub decided, was that the Nagai seemed to have no method to their madness, and that meant the Imperial and Alliance ships couldn't have a method either. Yorub knew that, for all their apparent disorder, there had to be *some* flagship commanding the Nagai. While Admiral Stazi did his best to manage the battle at the tactical station, Yorub went over to the communications section.

"How are we doing at monitoring Nagai comms?" Yorub asked the lieutenant, a four-armed Toong.

"Still can't break their encryptions, Captain."

"Have you been able to map traffic patterns?"

"We're trying, but they're very decentralized."

"Can you show me?"

The Toong tapped on his control panel with one pair of hands. A small holo-image appeared in front of them, showing a static collection of dots connected by tracer lines to form a convoluted mesh of light.

"Line thickness denotes frequency," the lieutenant said. "We haven't been able to mark a single broadcast that's gone out from one ship to the rest of the fleet."

Yorub studied the holo carefully and tried to shut out the clamor the surrounding battle. He noticed about a half-dozen light-markers that seemed to sprout out thick lines, marking them as communications hubs. Nagai society was apparently divided into clans and castes, and the Alliance's limited intelligence on these raiders suggested they were more a confederation than a solid army. He began tracing the thinner lines sprouting from those communications hubs and found one spot of light that seemed to connect with them all.

"Can you mark this ship on our main holo?" Yorub stabbed a finger at it.

"I, ah, I can send it over to Tactical, Captain."

"Do it."

He patted the lieutenant on the back and hurried over to the tactical station, where Admiral Stazi was talking to his Imperial counterpart. Yorub ignored them for the moment and asked the section lieutenant, "Have you gotten the data-feed from Comm?"

"Yes, sir."

"They've denoted a ship. Can you patch that into the holo and mark it?"

"I'll try, sir."

The young Pantoran's blue hands dashed across her keypad. A few seconds later, a gold corona appeared around one red marker on the holo.

"What have you found, Jaius?" asked Admiral Stazi, conversation with the Imperial apparently done.

"I think I've marked the enemy flagship, sir."

In a battle like this, there was no point in hesitating. Stazi didn't ask Yorub to explain his method. He just asked, "Are you sure?"

"It's our best shot, Admiral."

"Lieutenant," Stazi told the Pantoran, "Designate *Mon Gesal*, *Mon Relorth*, and all accompanying fighter groups to attack that ship."

"Yes, sir."

As the lieutenant went to work, Stazi stepped back and took a steadying breath. Yorub sidled next to him and asked, "Should we inform the Imperials, sir?"

“Not yet, Jaius.” The Duro showed fierce teeth. “I’m hoping to claim this one for ourselves.”

Relik K’sharn had gained to success as a warlord thanks to his ferocity, his ambition, his charisma, and perhaps most of all to his willingness to follow his sudden bursts of knowledge- feelings or hunches to lesser beings, but not to him. Normally these bursts of illumination came when he’d thrown himself fully into fighting, and they guided him like instincts to one victory after another.

This time knowledge came as a clenching dread in his stomach. That took him by surprise, because the battle had been going so well, and surprise made him hesitate where he normally wouldn’t. He therefore gave evasive orders only seconds before the Alliance ships started bearing down on *K’dath* with all weapons blazing.

The two nearest Mon Cal ships- one heavy frigate with two ventral fins jutting beneath its nose like fangs, one cruiser with a single scythe-like structure bisected by the bow-attacked *K’dath* from either side. At the same time, Crossfire interceptors and D-wing bombers began making attack runs, nibbling at the Nagai flagship’s shields and taking out weapon emplacements with well-placed turbolaser volleys.

The battle elsewhere was going well, but none of that would matter if the Alliance took out K’sharn and his ship. The warlord was ready to burst with anger as he shouted, “Captain! Call all nearby ships to defend us!”

The captain and *K’dath*’s crew complied, but the two Mon Cal vessels had them effectively boxed in on either flank. K’sharn ordered helm to put more power to engines and push them ahead, but a flight of D-wings swooped down and unleashed a wave of concussion missiles. The forward shields were barely able to contain them, and explosive scatter across the shields eclipsed the viewport for nearly a minute.

As *K’dath* struggled ahead, the Mon Cal ships continued their broadside barrages. Nagai ships, even new and powerful ones like K’sharn’s, simply weren’t powerful

enough to slug it out with a heavy Alliance cruiser, let alone two of them.

As *K'dath* finally started pulling away from them, a series of explosions somewhere on the ship rocked the bridge so hard even K'sharn was thrown off his feet. He immediately scrambled upright and barked, "Report!"

"They've just knocked out aft shields!" the captain snarled. "Engine two is down!"

K'sharn swore and looked out the forward viewport to see another Mon Cal cruiser bearing down on them. Somehow the Alliance had marked his ship as a target. They'd marked *him* as a target and were sparing no effort in taking him out.

Through his anger he felt a touch of pride, but didn't savor it. They might take his ship but he refused to let them take him. His entire life had been leading to this campaign. From the start he'd known he was meant for something great. He had knowledge, charisma, and ambition that had set him apart from the others. He had a destiny and he wasn't going to let anyone steal it from him.

"Begin a self-destruct countdown," K'sharn said. He didn't even shout, but the words stunned the frantic bridge crew into silence. "Everyone who can, evacuate ship. The battle isn't over and we are *not* defeated. Not yet."

Indomitable was on the edge of the combat zone and battling a trio of fast Nagai frigates, so Captain Yorub failed to see the death of the enemy flagship with his own eyes. He did, however, spot its haloed marker wink out on the tactical display, along with the green lights indicating both *Mon Gesal* and *Mon Relorth*.

Standing beside him, Admiral Stazi swore. "Blast. What happened, Tactical?"

The Pantoran squinted at her console. "That frigate seems to have self-destructed."

"Did we lose our cruisers completely?" asked Yorub.

The lieutenant shook her head. "They took heavy damage, but they might be salvageable."

"We can't spare cleanup crews now, they'd be cut to pieces in this fray," Stazi said.

Yorub wanted to object, but the admiral was right. There was little hope of recovering those crew now. At least the destruction of their flagship would throw the Nagai into chaos.

"Sirs," the comm lieutenant called, "We're getting a hail from the Imperial flagship."

"Patch it over here," Stazi said, and a moment later an insert holo appeared beneath the tactical display. "You called, Admiral Veed?"

"What did we just see, Admiral Stazi?" the beady-eyed human said. "It looked like a self-destruct."

"The enemy flagship has been elinated," the Duros said. "Not the way I was hoping, but it's down."

Veed frowned. "You're certain it was their flagship? How did you identify it?"

"We have to be prepared for anything now." Stazi sidestepped the question. "Concentrate on securing Terminus first. Once the planet is safe, *then* we can chase down runners."

"*If* they run at all," said Veed. "These aliens are fierce fighters. Is there anything *else* you should tell me about?"

"Nothing for the moment."

Veed shut off the connection without another word. "Prickly, isn't he?" muttered Yorub.

"You know these Imperial types," Stazi said. "Still convinced *they're* running the galaxy, after all this time."

"You'd think some people would learn to take a hint." Yorub looked back at the tactical holo. A few Nagai ships started to peel away from the planet, the first signs of a possible retreat. He felt his spirits lift. "Lucky we're all on the same side nowadays."

"Quite," said Stazi dryly. "Tactical, give all ships a hail. Tell them to let runners run and focus on clearing lower orbit of Nagai ships. We came here to save the planet, and people of Terminus need to know the Galactic Alliance always keeps its word."

As *K'dath* self-destructed in a blinding inferno, Relik K'sharn pivoted his starfighter around to get one final look at

its death. The vessel had been with him since he led the first Nagai crusaders off their pitiful colony on Saijo, and grief for its loss was tempered by the sight of its explosive charges enveloping the two adjacent Mon Cal cruisers, tearing scorched holes into their hull and spilling out wreckage that mixed freely with what was left of the Nagai ship.

He could spare only a second's glance. The battle still raged on all sides and his crusaders needed leadership. His was in one of two dozen trident-shaped starfighters that had fled *K'dath* before its destruction, and he sent a signal to the other pilots to take formation around him. As the fighters swarmed to his side he tapped out another signal to the leading ships in his fleet, announcing that he was alive and that they should keep up the battle. He ordered that priority was to be placed on overwhelming and destroying the Alliance flagship. Blood for blood was the only justice.

With their clear-set top-down command structure and fondness for big, heavy flagships, it wasn't hard to spot the scythe-fronted Mon Calamari cruiser. K'sharn directed all his fighters to attack it and was joined by a motely rush of gunships, corvettes, and frigates that made their runs on the ship and did what Nagai warriors did best: overwhelm its defenses with fast hit-and-run attacks.

"More fighters incoming, warlord," a pilot warned. "Crossfires *and* TIEs."

"Peel your squadron back and take them. Everyone else, continue the attack."

K'sharn barely noticed as some of his fighters darted off to engage. Rage over losing *K'dath* filled him and he let it fill him; he'd learned a long time ago that there was great power in rage. His instinct, his blessed knowledge, came to him in a rush and he always knew exactly what he had to do to deal the greatest damage to his enemies.

He led his fighters into a steep dive, splattering laserfire over the Mon Cal ship's heavy shields. They dove in low, just above the shield barrier, too close for the defensive turbolasers to hit, then veered away and unleashed more laserfire at the top of the cruiser's nose-mounted scythe. To compensate for its easy target profile, that section of the ship

was heavily shielded and heavily armed, and more defensive cannons swung to spray green plasma in K'sharn's face. He heard screams from his pilots who failed to evade but paid no attention. He let rage and instinct guide him, and he sent out a pair of concussion missiles that managed to slip through the overwhelmed shields and impact on the hull, just as he knew they would. Their explosion ignited the plasma stores for a series of turbolaser batteries, resulting in a greater fireball that tore off the entire tip of the scythe and weakened shields over the rest of the ship.

"All fighters attack!" K'sharn cried. "Follow me! Put all firepower on the bridge!"

The command decks of these Mon Cal cruisers were always camouflaged on their organic, asymmetric hulls, for the exact reason of preventing a full-on attack. Yet once more, K'sharn's knowledge came to him through his rage. He spun his fighter around its broken scythe and cut across its superstructure.

Knowledge told him which bulge against the hull was the command station and he dove on it, cannons blaring. The other ships following his lead- the starfighters, frigates, gunships- marked his target, and once he finished spraying laserfire on its reinforced shields, they added volleys of their own.

K'sharn cut past the cruiser's aft and wheeled around for another pass, certain that in minutes, his ships would overwhelm the bridge shields. With their command dead, the Alliance forces would be broken, and then he would deal with the Imperials, and *then* he could claim Terminus, and then his people would be united as never before by the pride of having defeated the two greatest war machines in the galaxy.

Something smashed into his fighter and sent him spinning. No knowledge, no warning, not that time. K'sharn swore and struggling with the controls, and just when he brought his fighter out of its spiral his viewport filled with a splash of red laserfire from some Alliance snubfighter. His shields caught them, but only for a second. Then his ship shook so hard his head smashed against the cockpit frame. He heard his helmet

crack on impact, then saw nothing, felt nothing, not even rage.

When the Nagai frigate off their starboard flank burst into flames, Captain Yorub finally started to breathe again. For a handful of horrible minutes it had seemed like *Indomitable* was doomed. He had no idea how the Nagai had marked the flagship's command deck, but they'd concentrated as much firepower as possible on it, bringing its shields to their breaking point. Then, just as suddenly, their attack formations had scattered, confused, and that gave an opening to the ships- both Alliance and Imperial- rushing to help *Indomitable*. The Nagai frigate, the largest one attacking, found itself pinned between the Mon Cal cruiser and an Imperial star destroyer. It went down in minutes.

In his relief, Yorub didn't notice the rest of the battle until the tactical lieutenant pointed it out. "Sirs," the Pantoran said, "More Nagai ships are breaking away."

"Are they fleeing into hyperspace?" asked Stazi.

"Some are. Others are lingering at the edge of the battle zone."

"It's like they suddenly lost the will to fight," Yorub said. "I don't understand it."

"Neither do I, but I don't see a trap in this," said Stazi. "We need to press the advantage while we have it."

"Agreed. Lieutenant, tell the Imperials they have our personal thanks, and that it's time to start cleaning up this mess."

"With pleasure, Captain."

Yorub still didn't understand what had turned the tide, but he was grateful. Over the next hour the Nagai ships slipped away from the battle zone and jumped into hyperspace, mostly on a vector toward their main colonies in the Saijo Sector. Only a few tried to fight to the end, but against superior numbers and firepower, they didn't last long. Soon all that was left over Terminus was a motley but victorious mix of local, Alliance, and Imperial ships, along with a huge amount of scattered wreckage that was starting to drift in solid orbit around the planet. Cleanup from today's battle

would take weeks, but *Indomitable's* job, at least, was finished.

"The Empire is thoroughly grateful for your assistance in this matter," the Imperial commander, Veed, told Stazi after it was done.

The Duro favored his holo with a tiny nod. "And we are grateful for *your* assistance, Admiral. Perhaps our governments will cooperate again some time."

"Perhaps. We will avail ourselves of local repair facilities before we begin the long trip back to the Imperial space—with Alliance permission." He added the last as an afterthought.

"It's the least we could do for your assistance," Stazi said, very politely.

When the holo shut off Yorub stepped close to the admiral and shook his head. "I know it's poor form to act ungrateful to your allies, but I'd be fine with not cooperating with the Imperials again."

A smile twitched on Stazi's green face. "I don't expect you'll have to worry about it too much. Their actions here will allow the Imperials to posture as respectable peacekeepers for quite some time. I'm sure Veed is already calculating how to present his side as having *really* won the battle."

"I can't wait to hear about it."

The admiral's smile wilted. "Still... I can't help the feeling that we *both* got lucky. There's so much about these Nagai raiders we simply don't understand."

"Do you think we'll be going to the saijo Sector to finish them off?"

"Quite likely. I think—"

"Admiral," the communications lieutenant said, "We're receiving a hail from fleet command."

"Excellent timing. Put him on."

The next holo-image to appear was of an old Quarren with rough-wrinkled skin and gnarled tentacles dangling from his face. "Congratulations on your success, Admiral Stazi," Supreme Commander Lekhwash began.

"Thank you, sir." The Duro dipped his head in a slight bow. "The Nagai fleet has completely exited the Terminus system. We believe most of the raiders have fallen back to the Saijo sector."

"I understand. The Imperials?"

"Still in-system. They'll need time to repair their fleet before withdrawing. So will we. These Nagai are fierce fighters."

"Indeed. Admiral, I want you to delegate two cruisers to remain at Terminus as a guard against future incursions. Otherwise, the rest of your ships should be prepared to return to the Core.

That surprised Yorub, and the admiral too, but Stazi kept it off his face. "Are we to leave the Saijo sector under Nagai control?"

"We will deal with the Nagai when it's appropriate. Right now we'd like as many ships available as possible."

"May I ask for what purpose?"

Lekhwash's face-tentacles twitched. "A lot has happened while you were putting out brush fires. Something had gone wrong with the Ossus Project."

Stazi stiffened. Yorub knew he'd been following the attempted reclamation of Duro closely. "*What* has gone wrong?"

"The Vongforming that was supposed to repair their ecosystems has had the opposite effect. They're more uninhabitable now than ever before. Many settlers who'd gone back have been killed. Others have been... infected with Vong spores of some kind."

"Is this happening on *all* the planets?"

"The situation is developing but yes, it seems that all of the Vongformed planets have been despoiled... except for Ossus."

"Curious," Stazi said, and nothing else.

"I can't tell you more at this time. Do you know how long it will take to repair your ships?"

"No. And I'm not sure how damaged the facilities at Terminus are. But I'll aim to be back in the Core in ten days."

"We should know more then," Lekhwash said. "Thank you for your service, Admiral. I look forward to seeing you again."

The holo shut off. Stazi lowered his head in silence but Yorub could hear whispers rustling across the sudden hush of the bridge. He looked around and saw other Duros, a Falleen, a Tynnan, two Ithorians... all beings who, like Stazi, had grown up on far-flung colonies while their homeworlds sat ruined by century-old Vongforming. The Jedi and their Ossus Project had offered hope to all those exiled communities, and now that hope had been dashed in the worst way.

No, Yorub thought, the worst was yet to come.

"Another Yuuzhan Vong war..." he whispered. "Do you think it's possible?"

"Perhaps."

"We should have never trusted them."

"Perhaps," Stazi repeated, then drew himself straight. "Captain, please oversee cleanup duties. I'll be in my quarters."

"Yes, sir." Yorub snapped a salute, but the admiral didn't see it. His back was already turned.

When Stazi stepped off the bridge Yorub realized the eyes of the crew were all on him. There was fear and shock in them, the thrill of victory entirely swept away. They needed something, but it was nothing Yorub could give. Inspiration speeches were the admiral's forte, and he wasn't able to give them now either. So he took a breath and started giving orders. There was a lot of post-battle cleanup that needed to be done, and in doing it some of them might take their minds off the old wound re-opened. It wasn't much, but it was all he could do to help.

"The repair facilities here on Terminus took damage from the fighting, and repairs might be slow," Morlish Veed said. "It may take as much as two weeks to get back to Imperial space."

"Don't feel you have to rush," Emperor Roan Fel told the admiral's wavering blue holo-image. "We will follow the

Vongforming situation closely and wait decide our course carefully.”

“It was wise not to let them try their experiment on any of *our* worlds,” Veed said. “The Alliance has reaped what it’s sown. The Empire should take part in the retribution.”

Standing in the communications chamber in his citadel on Bastion, Roan suppressed a sigh. Veed was nakedly ambitious and had pressed hard to lead a battle group to the galaxy’s opposite rim to subdue the Nagai raiders. Roan had agreed, mostly because the Empire’s putting down far-flung regional disturbances was a low-cost way to enhance its prestige.

“What retribution would you have in mind, Admiral?”

“The Vong will have to be punished.” Even in the holo-image you could see the hungry light in Veed’s eyes. “If the Jedi will not allow it, or if there’s even a *hint* that they were involved in this treachery, they’ll have to be punished too.”

Roan crossed his arms over his chest. “What form of punishment?”

“The Vong should have been exterminated a century ago. If the Jedi don’t give up Zonama Sekot’s location, someone will have to make them do so.”

“The extermination of planets and species was what the *old* Empire did, Admiral. That is not the Empire my father and grandfather made. Furthermore, the Alliance will lead the response to this crisis. *Their* worlds were despoiled, not ours.”

“You know as well as I do the Alliance will dither. It took them months to muster a response to the Nagai. The Empire has a chance to take swift, decisive action in the name of justice and order.”

“That will be *my* decision to make.”

“And the Moff Council’s.”

“Yes. And the Moff Council’s. *Your* duty, Admiral, is to make sure your battle group is properly recovered, then return your people safely to Imperial Space. Is that understood?”

“Completely, Majesty. Is there anything else?”

“Not for now. Do your duty, Admiral.”

Veed gave a salute, then killed the connection. Roan had no doubt he was already planning to get back to Bastion as soon as possible and press for a harsh attack on the Vong. As commander of the Imperial Navy, he had a seat on the Moff's high council, and would no doubt try to nudge Roan into another war. Moff Geist, head of the army, would surely join him, though Roan counted on the current Grand Admiral, Fenn Kaylac, and Moff Rus of the Imperial Mission to join his side in offering prudence.

Politics was a calculated and tiring game, and sometimes Roan grew sick of it. It had been twenty-seven years since he'd succeeded his father as Emperor. That meant all of his adult life. In that time he'd successfully promoted the peaceful expansion of the Empire. Military campaigns, such as the one against the Nagai, had always been undertaken selectively and often in conjunction with the Alliance. After growing up in his father's violence-torn reign, Roan Fel had made victory without war the Empire's priority.

An attack on the Vong would be something else entirely. The location of their homeworld Zonama Sekot was a secret carefully guarded by the Jedi, who'd championed their integration into the galaxy for a hundred years and with particular strength since Kol Skywalker came on the Jedi Council.

Now their righteous stance might destroy them. Veed, and nearly everyone else, quickly assumed the devastation on those Vongformed worlds was an act of deliberate malice by the Yuuzhan Vong themselves, but Roan was unsure. The Jedi were not fools, nor were they given to wanton destruction. If just one world had been ruined he'd suspect a rogue shaper or honest error, but to have a hundred worlds devastated- all of the Vongformed planets except Ossus itself- was almost *too* damning. He could find no good explanation for it. Roan had yet to speak to anyone on the Jedi Council since the news came down- the masters were expectedly busy- but he would arrange a meeting when he could.

And if the Jedi did *not* have a good explanation for what had happened, it would be much harder to stay the

aggressors on Moff Council. In truth, he wasn't sure that he should.

With an uneasy mind, Roan stalked out of his communications chamber and through the halls of the Imperial palace. He'd ordered its construction at the start of his reign, requesting a building that recalled the best years of the long-gone Old Republic rather than that of the Empire at its infamous height. As a result it was stately instead of grim, with wide corridors, marbled stone walls, and plenty of natural light. His Imperial Knights possessed their own academy building adjacent to the palace. Its exterior had a matching baroque style but the interior decor was more minimalist; the Knights were royal servants and soldiers but they still adhered to the ascetic tradition of the Jedi in many ways.

Roan made his way down so-familiar halls to one of the training centers located on the ground floor. He came here instinctively, drawn by the Force and the confluence of three minds he felt from a distance. The black tension in his chest eased a little at the sight of them standing on the practice mat, the three women who meant the most to him in the galaxy.

His wife- Elliah Chalk Fel, Empress and First Knight- wore a loose gray dress and stood at the edge of mat with her arms crossed. Fel came up behind her, and without looking over her shoulder she sent him a slight nudge in the Force, and an urging to stay silent.

On the mat were an old woman and a very young one. Princess Marasiah Fel, dressed in a white belted tunic recalling that of a Jedi padawan, sat cross-legged with her eyes closed in a classic meditation pose. Roan watched her carefully. He saw her fingers twitch as they clasped her knees, saw one eye threaten to open. Marasiah was just ten years old; concentration was hard for her.

Seated across from the princess in a mirror pose was her grandmother and namesake. The empress dowager was a small woman with still-long hair gone white. A former fighter pilot turned Jedi, Imperial Knight, and ultimately Empress and First Knight, Marasiah Valtor Fel nowadays brought back memories of Roan's grandmother. Like Jaina

Solo Fel, she had capped a long, busy, and sometimes tragic life by becoming mentor to the newest generation.

Grandmother and granddaughter faced each other with a meter of space between them. A single metal staff sat like a barrier in its center. Lined up with the staff, closer to the empress dowager, were seven flexfabric balls.

Roan and Elliah watched as their daughter found concentration enough to lift the staff in the air. It hung horizontally between the two sitting figures at face level, though both kept their eyes closed. With her own touch of the Force, the old woman picked up one ball and swung it through the air. The princess sensed its approach and spun the staff to block it. The ball plopped harmlessly onto the mat; the staff remained in midair. The old woman picked up the next ball and threw it at her granddaughter. Again, the younger Marasiah shifted the staff in her invisible grip to deflect it. The strain showed on the girl's face but she blocked a third ball, and then a fourth. Silently, Elliah reached out and squeezed her husband's hand.

The fifth ball got through and popped the princess in the right cheek. She immediately yelped and her staff clattered to the ground. She rubbed her face and, pouted like the child she was. "That *hurt*."

Her grandmother picked up the closest ball and squeezed it with her small hands. "Nothing that will leave a mark."

"I got four though, didn't I?" Marasiah looked up and noticed her parents for the first time. "That's two more than last time, right?"

"It's a marked improvement," her grandmother said. "Congratulations."

Marasiah and Marasiah got to their feet and exchanged from-the-waist bows, signifying the match was over. The girl still seemed to itch with energy, and Elliah told her she could go to the practice room next-door and get in work handling the training swords. As his daughter hurried off Roan allowed a swell of pride that was welcome relief from the day's troubles.

"She has a way to go," the elder Marasiah said, "But she's young."

"Younger than you or I when we started training," added Elliah. She looked at her husband. "Well? Is there any good news?"

"Veed's mission to Terminus was a success. The Nagai raiders are smashed."

"I'm sure he'll be back soon to brag about it. Anything *else*, good or bad?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Nothing to speak of. Everyone's still scrambling to respond over what's happening to the Vongformed worlds, but no one's done anything, yet."

"They will, and we know what they'll do," Elliah said. "The only question is whether the Jedi will stand with the Vong, or step aside."

"Unless they're given a compelling reason to do otherwise, the Jedi will stand firm." Marasiah's tone was melancholy; though she'd spent her whole life in the Empire she'd trained in the Force before Roan's father had created the Imperial Knights. She understood Jedi ways better Roan or his wife could.

"That could be suicide," Elliah said.

"Perhaps. The Jedi have a weakness for lost causes." Marasiah looked to her son. "You should contact Ossus."

"They've not reached out to us."

"I know, and that's all the more reason. Figure out where they stand. Tell them where *we* stand. Meet with your uncle and Kol Skywalker personally."

"Kol Skywalker is already a busy man," said Roan. Earlier today he'd read the report from Moff Calixte detailing how she'd recovered the Jedi Master, Roan's distant cousin, from a crippled shuttle over ruined Wayland. "But you're right. We need to keep communication open. We don't want the Jedi to become enemies."

"Do you think it will come to a war?" asked Elliah.

"I don't know. Anything is possible." He put a hand on her shoulder. "If I'm to meet with the Jedi, you should go to Hapes."

She nodded. Though she was now Empress and First Knight, she'd been born a Hapan noble. Her whole family,

save her younger brother Hogrum, had been wiped out by the Hapan's Sith queen, and the Empire had been both her refuge and her place to make a new life. Hapes had changed much since the destruction of Queen Serissa and her Sith; the old aristocracy was gone and the sixty-three worlds had been shepherded into a surprisingly functional democracy under the guidance of Roan's cousin Allana. For her role in that liberation struggle, Elliah was welcome and honored on her former homeworld.

"What should I do there?" she asked.

"Talk to their leadership, and others you know. Sound out their position. Encourage them, very strongly, to stay neutral in whatever lies ahead."

"I don't think that will be too difficult," Elliah said. The Hapan military had been savaged in the war thirty years ago and never fully rebuilt.

"Make sure they know *our* stance as well."

"And what is our stance?"

Roan exhaled. "We hold the line. When I came to power I pledged victory without war. My father never broke his promises, nor did my grandfather. I won't be the first Fel Emperor to go back on his word."

He meant what he said, but deep down, a quiet and frightened part of Roan Fel wondered whether the Empire's fate was really in his hands at all.

Stars spread out forever, drifting across his plane of vision, something winking out and winking on when drifting debris hid them from sight. The subtle darkening made the stars seem weak and inconstant, the darkness vast and eternal. Relik K'sharn waited to be taken but it; it wouldn't be long now. He remained in his broken, drifting fighter, too weak to move. The explosion that had crippled his ship had impacted the cockpit, smashing in one ribcage without tearing the vacuum seal of his flight suit. He wished the suit had torn, wished that the impact that had knocked him unconscious had succeeded in shattering the faceplate of his helmet. As it was, he stared through nail-thin fractures at the stars, felt agonizing pain from his internal injuries, and waited to die.

It was hard to even summon anger now. It would do him no good. All his ambition and aims, the great goals he'd been sure he'd accomplish, had flashed tantalizingly before him; now they were impossibly distant. His people would be smashed into submission by the Alliance and the Imperials. His nascent interstellar empire would be dismantled. And he would die in cold space, then drift forever, forgotten.

He should have raged at it, but in the end, he was too weak, too tired.

All that was left to do was give up. He still had strength in his right hand. He could unseal the latch on his helmet and invite freezing vacuum in. It would not be a pleasant way to die, but it would be swift. That was something. Better than bleeding inside or starving slowly.

Then a bright light erased the black. He squinted into it, wondering if this was a hallucination, brought on as a herald of death. He raised his right hand to shield his eyes and made out the hard angles of a spaceship floating dead ahead of him.

A rescue vessel, he thought, but not a Nagai one. The Imperials or Alliance were combing the wreckage, looking for survivors. He'd never let them take him prisoner. That decided him. Still squinting into the light, he reached to the rim of his helmet.

His hand froze. He willed it to move, willed himself to die, but his hand simply would not budge. His entire body refused to obey him as the recovery vessel dragged his broken fighter into its maw. Bright light enveloped him on all sides, blinding him, and he couldn't even close his eyes.

Once he was fully inside the ship the invisible grip released him. Removing his helmet would do no good now; he spotted a few dark-suited figures bare-headed in the corner of the hangar, still hard to make out in the all-consuming glare.

And then a figure was dead in front of him, perched on the wrecked nose of his starfighter, peering at him through the shattered transparisteel of his cockpit. He was a Chagrian, body wrapped in black robes with his face marked in fierce red and black tattoos. His eyes had a strange gold tint and he stared at K'sharn, curious.

"You..." the Nagai wheezed, "Not... Alliance?"

“No.” The Chagrian’s voice was a bass rumble.

“Who?”

“We have been looking for you. My master has watched your career and decided you have potential. Now he desires to meet you.”

“Your... master?”

The impacted portion of the cockpit pulled back from his side, as though drawn by an invisible grip. As he wrenched in renewed pain the Chagrian extended a hand. “Come with me, Relik K’sharn, and you can realize your destiny.”

“Who *are* you?”

“We are the One Sith,” he said. “We are the future.”

Chapter Three

The Jedi academy at Ossus was a twin set of step pyramids, one mounted atop the other and joined at their narrowest points to resemble nothing more than a giant, angular hourglass. The five-thousand-year-old temple had been repaired, reinforced, and added to, creating a structure that was simultaneously state of the art and elegantly aged. In nearly seventy years of life, Jade Skywalker had called many places home- from the endless agricultural fields of Fengrine to the living forests of Zonama Sekot- but Ossus had been the first one, and it was the home she kept coming back to, time and again.

She'd seen the temple take many moods and serve many functions, but she had never seen it like this. Beleaguered Jedi from a hundred worlds were bringing back their stunned and haggard parties. Those wounded or suffering from malicious yorik coral seed implants were clustered in the temple's gathering halls, which had become makeshift hospitals as overloaded as they were understaffed. The Jedi healers' academy at Rhen Var had emptied itself in the rush to send every halfway-able knight and apprentice, but raw numbers only did so much when no one had any idea how to cure these afflictions. The seed implants were Yuuzhan Vong bio-creations and therefore immune to the powers of the Force.

Jade was a highly experienced and respected Jedi Master, but she was not an expert healer. She helped how she could: directing people, instructing newcomers, distributing

resources and supplies, and generally managing a chaos made worse by confusion and dread that was palpable in the Force. It was a crisis for the whole Jedi Order like nothing Jade had dealt with before, and nothing she could recall hearing of from her father Ben, or her grandfather Luke. Still, she wielded authority as best she could. She'd never had a commanding presence- she was a small woman, with sandy-blond hair now mostly white, and a soft voice- but she was a Skywalker, and that demanded instant attention.

The temple was full of strange sights now, too many to number, but when Jade Skywalker saw a two-meter-tall, pale-faced Yuuzhan Vong warrior walking dazedly down the halls, holding the hand of a waist-high human child, she had to stop and see what was going on.

"Do you need help?" she asked. "Are you lost?"

The warrior blinked, as though he'd just noticed her, then said in lightly-accented Basic, "We have just come back. From Duro."

It wasn't a direct answer, but she understood. Hard information was hard to come by right now, but she'd heard that a Jedi leaving Duro had given himself over to an angry local militia so the others could escape. Jade crouched in front of the boy and tried to send soothing feelings through the Force.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Eli," the boy said meekly.

"His father stayed behind, at Duro," the Yuuzhan Vong said.

Jade understood completely. "Who was that?"

The warrior nodded. "His name was Reikar Horn. I... do not know his fate."

Jade knew him. He was about Kol's age, and like her younger son, Reikar belonged to a storied Jedi family. For that reason they'd gotten along well. Right now Kol was en route to Coruscant to meet with the heads of the Galactic Alliance. Worry for his friend must have been one more dagger in his heart.

"Thank you for keeping an eye on his son," she told the Yuuzhan Vong.

"It was... the least I could do."

"What's your name?"

"I am Khat of Domain Lah."

Jade took Eli Horn's other hand and stood up. "I can take care of him now. Thank you, Khat Lah."

"Yes." He nodded and released the boy, but still looked confused. "Master *Jeedai*... Where is the Master Shaper?"

"You mean Nei Rin? I don't know. She's extremely busy right now. Do you need her for something specific?"

"I... no. I suppose not." Khat Lah shook his head. "I do not know what to do, you see. I cannot help the shapers, and the *Jeedai*..."

Despite having lived on Zonama Sekot for years and gained close relationship with some Yuuzhan Vong, there were still times when Jade found it hard to interact with them. They were a blank spot in the Force, as unreadable as empty air. As a Jedi, using the Force to get a read on people came naturally, and the Yuuzhan Vong's stubborn insistence on confounding her instincts gave her pause.

"Perhaps... I can stay with this child, for now," Khat Lah said. "I have nothing else to do, you see. And I may be able to help... somehow."

With a face bereft of tattoos or ritual scars, Khat Lah was more aesthetically benign than many of his kind, but she still didn't know if a hulking Yuuzhan Vong warrior would be welcome company to Eli and the other children. She could see the needling on his face and hear it in his voice, and she guessed, "Did you promise the boy's father?"

After a second's pause, Khat Lah nodded.

"All right, come with me."

She led Eli and Khat Lah unerringly through frenzied but familiar halls, up the main lift shaft to the segment of the upper pyramid where the younglings were being kept. All the shock and trauma happening in other portions of the temple was feeding into the Force, and a few older knights had gathered the children together to shield them from others' harmful emotions. Her grandson Cade was there, one of the older apprentices gathered, and she could tell he was trying to act strong for the rest of them. The seniormost Jedi in the

room was Master Tili Qua, a grey-furred Chandra-Fan no taller than Eli himself. Master Qua accepted Khat Lah's offer of help with impressive equanimity. Jade decided to check in on the Yuuzhan Vong and Reikar's son later, then headed back down toward the makeshift medical bays to see how things were going.

She got down to the bottom level and was making her way to what was normally the temple's grand convocation chamber when she heard her name called against the crowded hallway's clamor. Without turning she knew it could only be one person it could be. Most Jedi called her 'Master Skywalker' or occasionally 'Jade,' but only two called her 'mom.'

"I didn't know you were back," she told Nat. He was a tall man with a thick muscular build and long hair the same dirty blond hers had once been.

"I just got in. I didn't realize it was such a mess."

Jade led her older son down a small side corridor where they could talk in relative quiet. "Did you have any problems leaving the Corporate Sector?"

"None. I didn't exactly advertise the fact that I'm a Jedi."

Jade understood. Kol had embraced the family name, joining the Jedi Council at a young age and spearheading the Ossus Project like it was his sacred, inherited duty. Her older son preferred to serve the Jedi in a more low-key way, running solo missions to the far-flung corners of the galaxy and doing everything he could to avoid attracting attention. Nat had an independent streak that made him suited to that kind of work; more, he was taking after his cousin, who'd been an influence on him in his early years. Thankfully, Nat hadn't left the Jedi Order as she had.

"I'm glad you're all right." Jade put a hand on his arm. "A mob at Duro took Reikar Horn. We're not sure if he's dead or alive."

Nat sighed heavily. "I was afraid something like that might happen. This could be just the start."

"I know. Kol's on his way to Coruscant."

"To face the triumvirate?"

"He took Lowbacca and K'Kruhk to back him up."

“Well, that’s something,” Nat sighed. In addition to being big, furry and fearsome-looking, those two were also veteran Masters who’d been dealing with politicians for decades. “Mom, do we know *why* this is happening?”

“Not yet. Clearly, something went very wrong with the Vongforming...”

“*Very wrong* would be the biosphere collapsing on one or two planets. This is a whole different level. They were *all* perverted, and all at the same time. This can’t be a simple failure and it can’t be a coincidence.”

“I know.”

Softly, cautiously, Nat asked, “What does the Force tell you?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. Right now, all I feel is what’s happening *here*, in the temple. Everyone who’s shocked and injured and angry. Beyond that... I don’t know.”

“Have any of the masters felt any... premonitions about this?”

“Not that I know of. Maybe it’s *because* we’re dealing with Vonglife that we’re having a hard time reading things in the Force. We can’t sense its bad intention because we can’t even sense it exists.”

“In that case the whole Jedi Order is blind. That’s not a good place to be.”

“I know. Right now, all we can do is help Nei Rin’s shapers and our healers. It’s not much, but it’s something. Come on, Nat. I was on my way to the main audience chamber. It’s turned into our biggest ward and if we’re lucky Nei Rin is there. If anyone can tell us what to do, it’s her.”

She slipped out of the hallway, Nat right behind her. Having her son with her wasn’t much, but right now, she needed any balm she could get.

Sometimes Lowbacca allowed himself to wonder what it would have been like to spend his life in the company of other Wookiees. It only seemed an option in retrospect; as a youth he’d been enthralled by stories of his uncle and yearned to go out into the stars to adventure as Chewbacca had. The discovery of his Force sensitivity only heightened

the craving. Still, he'd started to wonder how it would have felt to spend his life on Kashyyk. Time, at the very least, would have felt different.

A century was not a long time to a Wookiee, but a human it was an entire lifespan. After nearly a hundred and fifty years, the first scant strands of gray had started appearing in Lowbacca's brown-and-ginger pelt, but only if he scoured for them. Physically, he felt as strong and healthy as he had back when he'd trained as an apprentice on Yavin 4. His human friends from those days were all gone. They'd passed away one by one over accumulated decades; some peacefully, like Jaina and Tenel Ka, others violently, like Zekk or Jacen. For Lowbacca the peaceful deaths, brought naturally by time and age, had actually been harder to take, because watching his human friends wither and die felt like watching part of his own life die with them.

It was not a thing he allowed himself to grow maudlin about, not if he could help it. His fellow Jedi Master K'Kruhk was nearly a century older than him, and the Whiphid has seen his entire generation of Jedi slaughtered in Palpatine's great purge. The Neti Master T'ra Saa was even older. Still, sometimes he was struck hard by the successive generations he'd watched grow old and die, and those he'd watch in the future. It was fundamentally unfair, but unchangeable.

This was one of those times. He and K'Kruhk, as the most senior members of the Jedi Council, had joined Kol Skywalker on his voyage to Coruscant. Arlen Fel, who headed the Jedi consulate at the capital, had met them here. He'd known Arlen's mother Jaina since they were children; he'd watched her grow old and die, and he'd watched her son age in turn. Arlen was in his eighties now, white-haired and bearded. He moved steadily but slowly. Lowbacca could barely see in him the brash, adventure-hungry apprentice he'd trained.

What drew Lowbacca's attention now, though, was the other human. He had known four generations of Jedi named Skywalker, and he could barely recall seeing any of them look as old and haggard as Kol did now.

They waited in silence in a vestibule to a conference chamber used by the Galactic Alliance's ruling triumvirate. The triumvirate had kept them waiting over an hour, despite insisting the Jedi come as soon as possible. Lowbacca had served as leader of the Jedi Council for over forty years, and he was used to dealing with petty political snubs. He'd resigned his position in order to give younger Jedi like Kol a chance to lead and implement fresher ideas, but he'd also savored the chance to get away from messy political wrangling.

There was no avoiding it now, though, and he had a feeling things would get much worse very soon.

When the door finally opened a silver-faced protocol droid ushered them in. It was the same chamber Lowbacca had been in dozens of times, modestly sized and modestly decorated, with the triumvirs seated at a slightly-curved table, their backs to a panoramic window looking out on Galactic City's spires. No such table was provided for the Jedi; this was the sort of meeting where the visitors were expected to stand before their hosts and be judged.

"Thank you for coming promptly, Masters Jedi," said the human sitting in the middle. Bail Antilles' hands were folded on the table in front of him and he spoke without inflection. "As I'm sure you know, we have much to talk about."

"We'd like an explanation first," said the Ithorian triumvir Nu Toreena. "If the Jedi have anything to enlighten us?"

"Not at this time," Kol said. "Rest assured, we are doing everything we can to determine what wrong went with the terraforming process. We're also working hard for a cure to the yorik coral seeds that have been implanted in so many of the survivors."

"How many infected have you gathered at Ossus?" asked Gial Gahan. The Mon Calamari was the Jedi's most reliable ally among the triumvirs.

"Approximately four hundred. The medical facilities at the Jedi Temple were never meant for the intensive care of so many. We'll keep some for study and hopefully for healing, but we were hoping the Alliance could provide assistance with the rest."

“Master Skywalker, our medical teams are struggling with the infected we already have,” Nu Toreena said harshly. “From Tynna alone, we have over thirty *thousand*. Many have already died.”

Lowbacca trilled a response, and the protocol droid said, “Master Lowbacca suggests that, in comparison, relieving the Jedi Temple of several hundred would be a small task.”

“The Master has a point,” Antilles said dryly. “Have you made *any* progress in healing those infected?”

“At the moment, no,” Kol admitted. “But our Jedi healers and Yuuzhan Vong shapers are hard at work.”

“Ah.” Antilles crossed his arms. “So *that* is why none of the Vong have come with you to explain themselves?”

“Master Shaper Nei Rin wanted to come. I told her to remain on Ossus. I couldn’t guarantee her safety if she came to Coruscant.”

“Frankly, Master Skywalker, that’s rather insulting,” sniffed Toreena.

Politely, Kol said, “We all know that recent events have caused a huge spike of anger against the Yuuzhan Vong, despite no proof they were responsible.”

“Excuse me, Master Jedi, but it’s Vong biotech that’s infecting thousands of beings and destroying entire worlds yet again,” said Antilles. “How are the Vong *not* responsible?”

The human was the swing vote the Jedi would need to keep on their side. If they lost his favor, things would get much worse. Lowbacca gave a series of low rumbles, which the droid translated as, “Master Lowbacca reminds us that, under Alliance law, all beings are innocent unless a prosecutor can prove otherwise.”

“The Jedi and the Vong are not *part* of the Alliance,” said Toreena.

“No, but we are partners,” Kol said, and withdrew a set of datarods from his breast pocket. He placed them on the triumvirs’ table and said, “This is a record of all the data our healers and shapers have taken so far. We will keep sharing information as we learn more. We’re aiming for nothing less than total transparency between our peoples.”

"We're glad for that." Antilles seemed a little assuaged. "But you must understand, what has happened here is a disaster. Many are already describing it as an act of war, or the first step in another Yuuzhan Vong invasion."

"That's hysteria," said Arlen. "The Yuuzhan Vong have no more weapons or warships."

"So you say." Toreena spread her hands. "If the Alliance could send inspectors to Zonama Sekot to verify this, we might believe you."

Lowbacca felt Kol's silent conflict. The location of Zonama Sekot was a carefully guarded secret. Visitors from the Alliance had been invited before, but only in small numbers and only transported by Jedi escorts. A long time ago, a supposedly-vetted Alliance scientist had used his access to Zonama Sekot to research a bioweapon to target Yuuzhan Vong. The young Kol had nearly been killed stopping him, and Lowbacca's lifelong friend Jaina had exhausted her life to save Kol. A large investigation team like Toreena would surely want to open the world to more such threats.

But Kol understood politics too. He'd just spoken of transparency, so he couldn't deny Toreena's request completely.

"If the Alliance wants to send investigators to Ossus, they can observe our shapers working first-hand. If they want to see Sekot as well, we can arrange transport for a limited number."

"Thank you for your help in this, Master Skywalker," Gahan put in.

"We appreciate your cooperation," said Antilles, "But you must understand. The citizens of these despoiled worlds are furious. They're demanding fast action."

"Have any of them invoked Anaxes?" asked K'Kruhk. The Anaxes Treaty was a pact of mutual defense, both between the Alliance worlds and between other signatory states like the Empire. Its invocation would be, effectively, a war declaration against the Yuuzhan Vong.

"No one's invoked it yet," said Gahan, "Though some of them have raised the specter. Masters Jedi, for your sake, for

all our sakes, you need to provide an explanation for this quickly.”

Lowbacca could feel the pressure building inside Kol, but he kept it off his face. This whole project had been his creation; now his lifelong dream was in shambles and despair threatened to devour. Lowbacca sent a soothing feeling through the Force and trilled a question.

The droid translated. “Master Lowbacca says the Jedi are quite aware of popular anger, and he inquires about the fate of the Jedi taken captive by the local militia at Duro.”

That cast a grim silence over the room. Reikar Horn was a respected Jedi and personal friend of Kol Skywalker. When assigned to oversee the reclamation on Duro, he’d volunteered to bring his young son with him as a show of faith in the project. The Jedi had made overtures to the local government about his status, but had been totally rebuffed.

Lowbacca knew what Gial Gahan would say before he said it. “We have inquired about your missing knight. It appears that, after capturing him, the militia... killed him.”

Kol had kept a confident façade so far, but the news staggered him. With pity in his voice, Antilles said, “We are very sorry for your loss, Masters Jedi.”

“The militia murdered an innocent man,” said K’Kruhk. “We expect them brought to justice.”

“Have you apprehended the culprits?” asked Arlen. “And have you recovered Jedi Horn’s body?”

None of the triumvirs could meet the Jedi’s eyes. Antilles said, “We... understand there is no longer a body to recover. We’ll make every effort to make sure Jedi Horn’s killers are punished, but we’ll need... more cooperation from the locals.”

In other words, Reikar Horn’s killers were being feted as heroes by people hungry for vengeance over a homeworld twice-destroyed. No, not only vengeance. They wanted justice, and they deserved it, but they didn’t trust any government to deliver it, and were taking it for themselves however they could get it.

Lowbacca gave a mournful groan, and the droid said, “Master Horn’s death is a tragedy... for all involved.”

"This is very true," said Antilles. "We'll need your cooperation to prevent more actions of misaimed vengeance."

"You'll get it." Kol straightened. "I promise."

Lantillies was one of the major industrial worlds on the Perlemian Trade Route and it maintained a steady flow of starship traffic befitting a manufacturing and shipping hub. Dozens of skyhooks sat above the planet's atmosphere, bulky with their orbital shipping ports and storage containers, tethered to the planet's surface by miles-long umbilicals containing industrial-grade cargo lifts. The Lantillies government have constructed them to clear out the congestion on the planet's surface ports, but soon its lower orbit became just as packed with busy starships. Such was the price of economic success.

The traffic hadn't been as bad when Marin Solo first came here, almost thirty years ago. She'd been a different person then, with a different name, living a different life. She'd taken a lot of effort to distance herself from all that, but the sight of Lantillies stirred some old memories and left her discomfited. She came here often enough on cargo runs, so it wasn't just the planet. More, it was the news that had set the whole galaxy talking, sometimes in angry shouts, other times in tense, portentous whispers.

Marin tried very hard not to talk or think about it at all. She tried to focus on work instead, and at Lantillies that meant coupling her Correlian Action IX bulk freighter *Fast Start* to the usual skyhook, unloading a full supply of cargo from her last stop and taking more on. She was in the freighter's office space, double-checking manifests of the latest goods, when Benet stepped through the door and asked, "Have you seen the latest on the news nets?"

Marin, sitting behind the desk with her feet propped atop, didn't budge. "Should I?"

"I think you should see this one." He went over to the office's communications suite and turned it on. She'd have a much easier time not worrying about messes she had no control over if her husband stopped nagging her about them,

but Benet seemed to think she *wanted* to know all about it, even if she wouldn't say it aloud.

He switched to one of the main Alliance news networks. A Gran reporter was speaking directly at the audience with a backdrop of Coruscanti spires behind him. The reporter said, "The Alliance triumvirate said nothing else in their official statement, though they are urging all groups to remain calm. They report that they have just concluded a meeting with representatives of the Jedi Order- including the head of the Jedi Council, Kol Skywalker- and are preparing to send investigators to Ossus and Zonama Sekot itself to ferret out the truth behind the recent events."

The Gran's tone and diction were admirably neutral, but from the scraps of reporting Marin had seen from other networks, he was an exception. Most were calling the Vongformed despoiling 'attacks' instead of 'events,' and half of them were predicting another Yuuzhan Vong invasion. They also seemed split over whether the Jedi were pitiful dupes or active collaborators with the insidious Vong.

"This network has reached out to the local authorities on Duro for a comment," the Gran continued, "And we received an official reply a moment ago. The government of Duro- the government-in-exile- has said it 'regrets the hasty actions that resulted in the death of a Jedi Knight, but respects the rightful anger of its citizens.'"

Benet pressed a button to mute the broadcast. "How's that for a non-apology?"

Marin pulled her feet off the desk and sat up in her chair. "What happened to the Jedi?"

"They said one was killed by the local Duros militia when trying to leave the planet."

Against herself she asked, "Did they give a name?"

Benet shook his head. "Nothing yet. I hope it's nobody you knew."

"I doubt it. I didn't really have a lot of friends on Ossus. Even when I was... what I was."

Her past wasn't something she talked about. She hadn't told Benet until they'd started seriously considering marriage, and even then he'd gotten the condensed version. He knew

the important parts: that she'd been born on Bastion to a Jedi Knight and a wayward Mandalorian, that her father Arlen was on the Jedi Council, that her first cousin was Emperor Roan Fel, and that she'd made a hard exit from all that twenty-seven years ago. That was a lot for anyone to process and she was still amazed Benet hadn't run away after that.

She'd kept other things to herself: who she'd killed, who she'd failed to save. Their daughter knew none of it at all.

Benet asked, "If something happened to your family... do you think you'd know?"

Marin tried not to use the Force at all now, and after years of practice she was pretty good at it. She knew all too well the kind of power- good and bad- it could unlock from inside her if she let it. Still, she doubted she was rid of it entirely. If something happened to her father Arlen or her cousin Nat Skywalker, she believed she'd know. She gave Benet a curt nod and nothing else.

"This could get really bad, Marin. If the Alliance decides to hold the Jedi responsible for this... They may need help."

"What do you think I can do? All I've got is this ship." She rapped the closest bulkhead. "This is my life, now. *Ours*."

"If things get bad, one bulk freighter can be a lifeline."

"Since when are you such a pessimist?"

"I don't know. When did you become an optimist?"

"I'm not." She sighed. "I'm sorry, it's just... It's not that I don't care. I'm just used to thinking of all that... stuff as from someone else's life."

"I know." Benet sighed too. "Will you at least talk to your father or your cousin?"

She understood that when he said *cousin* he meant not Roan Fel but Nat, more distant genetically much closer personally. When she'd walked away from the Order she'd left Nat with her gold-bladed lightsaber, and best she knew he still had it.

"I will if I need to," she said. "But right now... Let's just wait and see."

"Wait and see what?" a high voice said from the doorway. Benet and Marin both jerked around to find their nine-year-old daughter clinging to the frame, peeking in hesitantly on her parents.

Ania had black hair like both of them. Her face had a rounded quality that took after Benet, while Marin's sharper features- to her slight chagrin- looked more and more like her Mandalorian mother's as she got older.

"Bad news is going around," Benet said. "About the Jedi and their Vongforming project."

"I noticed." Ania leaned deeper against the doorframe. "Do you think there'll be a war?"

Marin shot her husband a glare for letting Ania watch all the sensationalist news-nets. "We can only hope not," Benet said.

"For now it's business as usual," Marin insisted. "Once I finish checking in all these manifests, we're going to kick off from Lantilles and start hauling for Liana."

"Can I help BG-7 go over the cargo hold before we go?"

Ania had a light in her eyes as she asked it. A long-range cargo hauler was a strange place to raise a kid, as different as possible from Marin's childhood at the Jedi academy on Bastion. There she'd been stuck in one place but surrounded by family members, fellow apprentices, and elder knights who'd all combined to make one big clan. None of it had lasted, not for her. Aboard the *Fast Start*, Ania had only parents and a handful of personable service droids.

"I don't see why not," Marin said. "I'll check the manifests into the ship computer in about twenty minutes. Then you and BG-7 can check the cargo."

"Great. Thanks, Mom."

Ania ducked away, eager for her task. She wasn't getting a normal upbringing as most humans in the galaxy thought of it, but it was simpler and easier than what Marin had gone through. Certainly it was a more peaceful life. She was proud she could give that to her child, and she wanted to safeguard it more than anything.

They listened to their daughter's eager feet recede, and when they were sure she was out of earshot Benet said, "If things get bad we can send her to my parents."

Marin sighed. "It's not nearly that bad yet. Besides, I have a feeling Ania would be bored out of her mind on Pakref Minor. Weren't you?"

“Point taken. Still, it’s an option.”

“A last resort. I don’t want to split up this family, Benet.”

He nodded, knowing some but not all, knowing enough.

“Whatever happens next, we’ll stick together, we’ll keep our heads down, and we’ll ride it out,” Marin said. It had been her standard practice since leaving the Jedi Order, and it had largely served her well. She could only hope it continued to do so.

When the white-haired human woman- whom Khat Lah had since been informed was Master Jade Skywalker, mother of Kol and one of the Order’s most respected Jedi- returned to the apprentice’s area in the academy, she drew Eli Horn into a side room where she could speak to him in private. When she was done she stepped outside but the boy remained unseen. Skywalker exchanged a few words with the small Chandra-Fan master Tili Qua, then finally turned her attention to Khat Lah.

“Can you come with me, please?” she asked. “The master shaper wants to see you.”

“You relayed my request?”

“She asked about you, actually. Please come.”

Khat Lah followed her out of the chamber, down the hall to the lift. He asked, “What did you say to Padawan Horn?”

When her expression turned grave his heart fell. “We’ve just gotten confirmation that Eli’s father was killed at Duro.”

It was a blow Khat Lah had been half-expecting since they fled the planet, but it still struck hard. He sagged against the smooth metal wall of the lift tube as it dropped them to the base of the pyramid.

“I’m sorry,” the Skywalker woman said. “Were you and Reikar Horn... close?”

Khat Lah didn’t know how to answer that. It wasn’t as though he’d been *friends* with the Jedi; he’d never been friends with any Jedi. He’d heard of some close relationships between Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong- the master shaper and Kol Skywalker, namely- but as a member of the Ganner Sect he’d been taught that they embodied all the highest virtues and had saved his people from its false gods. That made them

hard to approach. The mission to Duro marked his first interaction with the beings he'd long idolized, and Reikar Horn had embodied all those storied virtues to the end.

"I was going to sacrifice myself," Khat Lah explained. "*Jeedai* Horn... overpowered me and launched himself out the airlock in my place. The Duros wanted Yuuzhan Vong, and he said they wouldn't kill a *Jeedai*..."

"Many people are angry," Jade Skywalker said sadly. "I'm sorry."

She touched his forearm softly. Khat Lah jerked it back on instinct; even though Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong were allies now, none of them had ever touched him like that, in empathy.

The door of the lift tube slid open. Khat Lah followed the Skywalker woman's white head through the crowd. Passers-by in the corridor quickly made way for the hulking Yuuzhan Vong and the small human in front of him. They didn't speak at all until they reached a great multi-level audience chamber now filled with beings of all races packed onto beds. Many displayed only minor outward injuries, but many more were suffering from yorik coral seeds visibly bursting from the skin all over their bodies. Jedi healers and Yuuzhan Vong shapers moved about in equal number, trying to tend to so many wounded, and they all wore the same beleaguered expression.

After Jade Skywalker told one young Jedi to find the Master Shaper, they settled along the edge of the chamber to wait. Khat Lah could see the discomfort on the woman's face.

"It is an ugly thing to see," he muttered.

"More than that," she replied.

"Can you... sense their pain? In the Force?"

"Oh, yes," she said hoarsely.

Khat Lah said nothing. He knew, intellectually, that all members of his race were separate from the otherwise universe-spanning power of the Force. Some priests and Jedi taught that the Yuuzhan Vong belonged to the Force as well, but had been exiled from it by their original homeworld, Yuuzhan'tar, after they had embraced the dark side within them. Some suggested that the Yuuzhan Vong deities were a

misinterpretation of the Force, others that the gods and the Jedi's Force were both limited theories describing something bigger than either. It was a probably would always be a mystery, but like many members of the Ganner Sect, Khat Lah nursed the desire, sometimes painfully strong, to experience the Force himself.

For once, he did not want that power. Not now.

Eventually the Master Shaper came for them. Nei Rin was a tall woman, and unlike many of her caste she wore no headdress, only black hair in a topknot, pulled away from her sloping tattooed forehead. She had been a prodigy as a child and was a longtime friend of Kol Skywalker. Together they'd founded the terraforming project as a way to bring the galaxy to trust the Yuuzhan Vong.

Her dream had led to disaster, but to her credit, Nei Rin projected a front of composure and calm. Perhaps, if he had the Force, Khat Lah would see beneath it, but that was never to be.

"Greetings, Master Shaper." Khat Lah gave a short bow. Though she belonged to a different caste she was of high rank and deserved respect. "I am honored to be summoned."

"Rise, Khat Lah. I have need of your assistance. The Galactic Alliance will be sending investigators to Ossus soon. Some will be taken to Zonama Sekot. They will see what we are doing there and know we had nothing to do with this disaster." There was the tiniest tremor to her words, as though she wasn't sure herself. "Once their investigation is complete, once they have left the planet, Zonama Sekot must jump to hyperspace. Sekot must not let anyone know its location, even the *Jeedai*. It must watch from a distance and only contact us again if it judges things are safe."

"Are things that dire, Master Shaper?"

A look passed between Nei Rin and Jade Skywalker, too quick for him to read. "The survival of Sekot is the survival of our race," the master shaper said. "Both are in more danger now than any time in the past hundred years. We cannot be too cautious."

Khat Lah snapped his wrists to his shoulders. "I will do as you asked, Eminence. But, if I may ask..." He struggled to

find the proper words, and in end just came out with it. “Why *me?*”

Nei Rin smiled a little. “Your reputation for bravery and honor precedes you.”

He hadn’t felt brave or honorable since the flight from Duro, but he nodded. This was a simple duty; even he should be able to achieve it. She saw his face wilt and added, “Much has been expected of you, Khat Lah. I’m sure you will not disappoint.”

After the master shaper excused herself, Jade Skywalker led him from the chamber. She seemed relieved to be out of there.

“I will fulfill my task, of course,” Khat Lah told her, “But... what will happen to Eli Horn?”

“I’m not sure,” Skywalker said. “His mother isn’t a Jedi. She lives on Corellia and she might want her son to come back to her... But as young as he is, he’s shown great promise so far. We don’t *want* to lose him, but I can understand if she wants to take him home... especially now.”

They walked in silence a little longer. Khat Lah noticed she was leading them toward the main hangar complex, where his fellow warriors were waiting for him with their battered Sekotan flier. “I should see to me people, and prepared,” he said, “But... I should like to see the boy before I go.”

She stopped and looked at him. The softness in her eyes made him glance away. “I understand. You did promise his father, after all.”

Khat Lah hadn’t, but that was all the more reason to honor the promise he *should* have made. If nothing else, he would make sure Reikar Horn’s sacrifice was not in vain. Right now, against so much else, with perhaps the fate of his species in the balance, nothing seemed more important than that.

Chapter Four

They took him to a planet called Korriban. It was the far side of the galaxy from Saijo, a dark and abandoned world that seemed permanently shrouded by black stormclouds. Its crags and valleys were cluttered with decaying monuments from a civilization long dead. Relik K'sharn understood nothing of this place, nor who his captors were and why they were bringing him here. Somehow, with the inexplicable certainty that had graced him all his life, he knew this dark crumbling world was a place of power.

K'sharn knew power. He'd worked his whole life to acquire it as warlord of the Nagai. The power hosted in these ruins was far different from that; mysterious, elusive, dangerous, but vastly greater.

The black-robed Chagrian, who called himself Darth Wyyrlok, claimed that he'd gone to great lengths to find and recover K'sharn. K'sharn didn't doubt it, but as they led him into dark catacombs reeking of ancient decay he felt like a prisoner, not a guest. As a warlord he'd grown used to deference and relished it, but he knew he'd receive none of that here. It was though he'd been ground down to a miserable peasant yet again. The thought of being reduced to where he'd started sparked the anger that had laid within him since the defeat at Terminus. Everything he'd fought and killed for had been already lost; death would have been merciful compared to having been brought this low.

In the end Wyyrlok led him to a high-roofed chamber where the only light came from four burning braziers placed

around a raised throne. Seated on the throne was a being like nothing K'sharn had ever seen before. The body was encased in some rough, jagged armor- stone perhaps, or organic- that covered arms, legs, torso, even face. At first K'sharn thought he was looking at some fearsome alien of a species he'd never known, but as he got closer he saw that the horned face was a mask that left the lower jaw bare, revealing the chin and lips shared by humans, Nagai, and similar races. Then his attention arrested on the eyes: one red like fire, the other blue like ice, with irises and pupils of different size. He wondered which eye, if either, had been this man's originally.

Then he fell to his knees. He didn't will himself to fall; he simply found himself on the hard stone, without the strength to stand.

"Do you know of the Force?" the man on the throne said. To K'sharn it sounded like thunder rumbling behind stormclouds.

"I... have heard of it." The Nagai's voice scraped in his throat. "It is a tool... the Jedi use."

"Have you ever faced a Jedi, warlord?"

This man said his old title with a trace of mockery. Deserved mockery, K'sharn knew, and the shame of his failure burned angry inside of him. He tried to hold to that anger; it was his only defense against the instinctive fear this man produced.

"I have not," K'sharn said.

"What do you know of the Sith?"

"I know that is what *you* are." Without looking, K'sharn felt the presence of Wyyrlok behind him. "And I know you're enemies of the Jedi."

"What else?" rumbled the man on the throne.

"I'd heard you were extinct. But that was wrong."

The man regarded him with eyes of ice and fire. "Do you know why we want you, warlord?"

That title again, more condescending than before. K'sharn wracked his mind for a reason why they'd have dragged him from the corpse of his fighter, hauled him halfway across the galaxy, then dropped him into these tombs only to belittle him.

Gritting his teeth he said, "I do not know."

"Do you wish we'd left you to die at Terminus?"

This man was capable of dealing instant death, right here, right now. He was willing. K'sharn sensed that. And he found, despite the shame of defeat, that he did not want to die. He wanted to fight back; he wanted to *hurt*. It was a desire for revenge, but not against the Alliance. He felt as though the whole universe had struck him down and wanted nothing more than to repay the damage he'd sustained, whatever way possible.

"I do not want to die," K'sharn growled.

"What *do* you want?"

There were so many ways to put it, and he waited to speak until he'd found the words that best fit the truth. "I want to stand up again," he said.

There was a long, long pause while the man on the throne considered his fate. Finally the man said, "So be it. Rise, Relik K'sharn."

The invisible weight pressing on him was suddenly gone. K'sharn stood upright and faced the throne.

"I am Darth Krayt, Dark Lord of the Sith," the man rumbled. "You have a gift, K'sharn. You must have realized that by now. You can sway those who would not ordinarily be swayed. You can sense events before they happen. Without those gifts, you would not have acquired your limited success as warlord of a backwater planet."

Those words should have sounded mocking again, but this time they did not. They were true; all K'sharn had attained through all his struggles was a fleeting victory and small notoriety in the galaxy at large. He knew, sure as he'd known anything, that this Darth Krayt aimed for much more.

"I have the Force," K'sharn said.

"Indeed. And you have determination, and anger, and lust for power. You have all the qualities of a Sith, K'sharn, except one. Only with proper training can you become part of my design."

The thought excited him. As a warlord for the Nagai he's reached his apex of possible power, then lost it calamitously. He was being offered a second chance and a glimpse of

power more elusive but far greater than what he'd known. Yet he'd been a commander for so long; master of armies, master of himself. He was being offered a subservient role to beings he knew nothing about.

"It is good to be ambitious," said Krayt, as though he'd read K'sharn's thoughts. "But do not let ambition consume you. We are *One Sith*. We will work together to bring the Alliance to its knees and crush the Jedi." He curled one armor-plated hand into a fist.

"How?" asked K'sharn. "When?"

"The Jedi will walk gladly to the slaughter after blinding themselves with their own righteousness. As they always do." Krayt's visible lips curved into a smile. "They are doing it as we speak."

One of the first duties of the emperor was to be constantly seen as emperor, in all his regal splendor, so that his subjects might draw encouragement and strength. That was one of the lessons Roan Fel's father had imparted to him, and like most of those lessons, he'd tried to live up to it every day since assuming the crown nearly thirty years ago.

It was therefore all the more discomfiting when Roan's shuttle set down on the landing pad next to the sole other ship, a Koensayer *Lightskimmer*-class scout vessel with an angular cockpit jutting out beneath five thrust engines and long wings that, when in flight, shifted to a slanted angle. Roan recognized it instantly and it looked all of its fifty-plus years in operation. No grand welcome party was arrayed to meet him. When he stepped down the ramp and into the planet's cool breeze, he was accompanied by only four Imperial Knights, hanging silent over his shoulder in their red armor and capes.

This was a remote world, just past the edge of Imperial space and barely populated. His body double was on Bastion, sustaining the illusion of his presence in the capital. What happened here today would be unwitnessed.

Roan Fel waited on the landing pad until the ramp swung down from his uncle's starship. The first to disembark *Starlight Champion*, however, was a tall red-haired man

about a decade younger than the emperor. It had been a long time since Roan had met Kol Skywalker in person.

After Kol came Arlen himself. His father's brother had cultivated the life of a Jedi errant in his younger life, and had elected to go to Ossus instead of join the nascent Imperial Knights on Bastion. The mildly roguish air Roan remembered from his childhood had been worn down by time; Arlen was now a white-haired, white-bearded man in a homely brown robe. When his eyes met Roan's his smile was at once fond and sad.

Coming after them both was another white head. Jade Skywalker wore dowdy robes also and pulled her pale hair into a ball at the back of her head. No one came down after them. Clearly they intended this to be a family discussion as well as a political one.

Still, Kol began it formally enough. "Greetings, Emperor Fel. Thank you for coming."

Roan gave one nod, slow and dignified. "I'm sure we have much to discuss."

Arlen swung a hand toward *Starlight Champion's* landing ramp. "We can take this to my living room, if you like."

"Very well." Roan looked back at his Knights. "You can wait in the shuttle for now."

One the younger Knights started. "But Your Majesty—"

"Do as your Emperor orders," said Treis Sinde, the oldest Knight in the group and Roan's friend since childhood. The younger knights acquiesced reluctantly, and before joining them in the shuttle he gave Roan a tiny, over-the-shoulder nod.

Then the emperor followed the Jedi into the belly of that old, rugged ship. It had been decades since he'd been inside, but he was immediately taken by an unlikely nostalgia. Nothing seemed to have changed since that long-ago day when he'd joined Arlen and Allana Djo here to plot the liberation of the Hapes Cluster from its Sith queen, along with his parents and his older brother. He'd never have imagined that liberation would cost the life of Vitor and his father both.

He took a seat at one of the cushioned benches and listened to Kol Skywalker recount the failure of the Ossus Project

from his perspective. Arlen and Jade listened in attentive silence, just as Roan did. Kol's story cut through much of the sensationalism and panic-mongering that was filling the news-nets, but Roan could hear the tension in the younger man's voice, the strains of doubt. He could feel them more clearly in the Force. He knew that Kol said what he believed to be the truth, but what he knew for certain was much more limited.

Kol insisted the Jedi had nothing to do with the despoiling of all those worlds, and Roan agreed. He knew the Jedi; he'd been trained by his grandmother Jaina to be one until his father had established the Imperial Knights and militarized the Empire's Jedi when Roan was eight years old. Jedi lacked the discipline and concentrated purpose of his own Knights, but their loyalty to peace and order in the galaxy was unquestionable. Kol also insisted that the Yuuzhan Vong shapers had nothing to do with this, and that was where doubts started to creep for them both.

"I've known Master Shaper Nei Rin almost my entire life," Kol insisted. "She's as devoted to her species' redemption as anyone could be."

"But you can't speak for *all* her subordinates, can you?"

"Can you speak for all of yours?" Kol snapped, defensive. Roan merely stared at him. The Jedi held his eyes and insisted, "Every one of her shapers was personally approved by her."

"Shapers and scientists can hide ulterior motives," Roan said. "You know that, Master Skywalker."

Kol flinched. A rogue Alliance researcher, trying to devise a weapon against the Vong, had spelled the end of Roan's grandmother. Kol needed no reminding of what happened to Jaina Solo, but Roan wanted to prod him in a painful spot to see his reaction. It was surprisingly muted.

"Nei Rin is investigating her shapers and their work," Kol said firmly. "So far she's found no hints of sabotage."

"I can't believe the simultaneous, malicious transformation on so many worlds is an accident. Can you, Master Skywalker?"

Kol gave a tiny sigh. "No. I can't."

Arlen spoke up. "Perhaps it was sabotage, but by someone else. Many Alliance scientists contributed to this project."

"Yes, but it was spearheaded by the Jedi and the Vong," said Roan. "Alliance scientists worked on individual planets. They wouldn't have had the resources or ability to ruin a hundred worlds at once. Would they?"

"Not on first glance," Kol said. "But we'll investigate that too."

"You'll need to do more than investigate, Masters Jedi. You'll need to find proof, absolute *proof*, that this disaster was not your fault, or the Vong's."

"We know that, Roan," his uncle said.

"Then you should also know that if you *don't* find compelling proof, you'll be blamed. I've heard the governments of all those stricken worlds are in talks right now to invoke the Anaxes Treaty. If that happens, all signatories- including Coruscant and Bastion- will be legal obligated to respond militarily against the aggressors- you and the Vong."

"We know that too," said Arlen.

"You should also know that if you *do* find proof of sabotage, and the real culprit is a Jedi or Yuuzhan Vong, you may still be held accountable by Anaxes. Even if it's one rogue shaper, or a single dark Jedi, *all* of you would be blamed."

Very seriously, Jade asked, "Would you take the Empire into a genocidal war over a single rogue shaper?"

Now it was Roan's turn to sigh. "I would resist it at all costs. I do not want a war."

"Especially one with family on both sides," Arlen said.

"Yes."

"What about the Moff Council?" asked Arlen.

"It has its warmongers, but its power is limited. I can veto any resolution they pass."

"Can't they override your veto?"

"Only by unanimous vote, and the Moff Council is never unanimous on anything." Roan's smile was brittle. "You've all had seats on the Jedi High Council, now or in the past.

Surely you know how easy it can be to divide a democratic body, if you so choose.”

“Our Council runs differently than yours.” Kol looked like he found Roan’s cold pragmatism embarrassing. How very Jedi of him, reluctantly deigning to play politics while servicing higher virtues. Jedi sanctimony bordered on hypocrisy too often for Roan’s liking, but there was no point in bringing that up here. He hadn’t come to make enemies of these people.

“As Emperor, I can tell you that I’ll stay the Empire’s hand as much as possible. I have no desire to see Jedi and Imperial Knights battling one another.”

“I’m glad we agree,” said Arlen.

“However, I have no influence on what the Alliance does. Their democracy is much more fickle than ours, and right now a hundred of their worlds are mad for vengeance.” He passed dark eyes across the group. “It may be in the Jedi’s interest to use some of your famed persuasive techniques on some key Alliance senators, or perhaps a triumvir or two.”

“We’ll take that under advisement.” Arlen didn’t bother to hide his distaste.

“You should,” Roan said firmly. “The light side of the Force will not save you now. Nor will noble intentions or even the truth. *Politics* will. Something has gone very wrong. Someone is responsible and they did it deliberately. The entire galaxy needs to know who, how, and why. Until you can provide that, the Jedi Order will be in grave danger.”

“We understand everything you’re saying.” Jade sounded exasperated. “And we know the danger we’re in better than anyone.”

Perhaps they’d take his advice, perhaps not. Roan knew enough about the Jedi to be sure he’d never sway them, one way or the other. An organization that fancied itself as nobly aloof from politics was slow to see problems and slow to solve them. It was the trap the Jedi Order had fallen prey to a century and a half ago. Whether they’d learned anything in that time remained to be seen.

Their parting was formal, with nods and shaken hands, except for Arlen, who surprised his nephew by pulling him

in for a brief hug. Roan walked out of *Starlight Champion* alone and wondered whether he'd ever step inside that ancient ship again. He wondered if he'd ever see any of them at all.

When he stepped inside the hold of his shuttle, Treis was waiting for him. "Is it done?"

"It's done. I've agreed to stay the Empire's hand until the Jedi can find proof of who was responsible."

Treis nodded approvingly. Like Roan, he'd started Jedi training before the Imperial Knights even existed. Roan had noticed his Knights that had been trained since, which was the vast majority, had internalized a rivalry with the Jedi, one that mixed condescension with an unspoken sense of inferiority toward the far older organization. Some of them even wanted to test their mettle in battle against Jedi, but Treis was wiser than that. A war between the two orders would be a disaster for both.

Roan heard the half-familiar whine of *Champion's* warming engines. The sound alone threatened to pull him back decades, to a time when his family had been whole and the galaxy a far simpler place. He missed those days, barely remembered, but they'd never come again. Pining for them was a weakness he couldn't indulge.

"Wait until the Jedi have left orbit, then prepare for launch," he told Treis.

"Very good. Should we head was for Bastion, Your Majesty?"

He felt another yearning twinge for the days when Treis had called him a name instead of a title, but he knew that beneath the formality his old friend was an honest with him as anyone. "Please do. I have the Moff Council to wrestle into submission."

"Of course." Treis paused before heading for the cockpit. *Champion's* engines turned to a roar as it pushed off and hot wind rushed up the still-open ramp. "Any idea when we can expect the Empress' return?"

"No," Roan said, "Give her time. When her work is complete, she'll come back to us."

Treis nodded once more, then went off to the cockpit. Elliah was taking her own sojourn into things past right now. Roan only hoped hers was more satisfactory.

Her life was increasingly spent engaging in acts of subterfuge, and having dinner with her second ex-husband in one of Ravelin's finest restaurants was one of the most straightforward things Nyna Calixte had done in a while. If only she could call it pleasant.

As an Imperial spy, Morrigan Corde had gained experience aplenty with creating and discarding new identities. Becoming Nyna Calixte and carefully manufacturing her backstory had not been difficult. Even sliding into a permanent new persona had been easier than expected. Still, to climb the ranks of power you needed connections, and a newly-created woman needed allies any way she could get them. Captain Rulf Yage had been one of those. He was an Imperial patriot and a capable tactician, and when it came playing organizational politics he was competent if unimaginative. Their marriage had not lasted long, but it was through Yage that she'd first met more important personages like the head of navy, Morlish Veed, and intelligence director Seniac.

He'd been a vital stepping-stone, but still a stepping-stone. Rulf was all too aware of that now, and Calixte had to ply him with almost a full bottle of wine to get him talking.

"No one really knows which way things will fall, so no one's lining up to pick up the pieces," he said.

"I'd thought Imperial admirals would be keen gamblers."

"Then you don't know admirals as well as you think you do." He added a snide smile. "It looks like the hundred ruined worlds will band together and invoke the Anaxes Treaty. Many think the Alliance senate will vote in favor and commit themselves to military action against the Vong and the Jedi."

"They could also go the other way," Calixte reminded.

"You're right. Maybe those Jedi will use their mind tricks and sway the senators. I don't know. But it's very possible they'll reject them and their Vong pets."

“And how do you think Fel will react?”

“The Jedi are family to him. Distant family but still family. There’s talk that if the Alliance declares war on the Jedi, Fel will defend them. Maybe send his Knights to Ossus. Maybe send the whole damn fleet.”

She’d already thought about that, but she tried to look surprised. “That sounds a little extreme. If there was a war between the Empire and Alliance, how do you think it would go?”

Rulf swallowed another mouthful of wine and thought it over. “The Empire has better ships, better weapons, and better-trained soldiers. That’s not even a contest.”

“Naturally,” she said.

“Naturally. But the Alliance has more systems. More resources. More ships. More *everything*. And if they’ve got a hundred angry worlds on their side they’ll have justice too. If they decide to straight-up invade our territory they could force us on a fighting retreat all the way to Bastion, though I think we’d make them pay hard for ever planet they took. But if we have the Imperial Knights and Jedi on our side, well, that might change things a lot.”

“You think we’d have a chance to win?”

“Define ‘win.’ Given the right circumstances I think we could capture and fortify whole sectors. Of course, the more we spread out fleets the thinner we spread them. I’d say we could take and hold, say, a dozen sectors, then force the Alliance to negotiate. I think a best-case scenario is that we take one or two key sectors in the Core.”

“So you don’t expect to park your star destroyer over Coruscant any time soon.”

“Unfortunately not.” Rulf poured himself a little more wine.

“What if our Knights and the Jedi are on opposing sides?”

That one took him by surprise, and he had to roll the words in his head until he found her meaning. “If the Alliance backs the Jedi, I doubt Fel would take up Anaxes and fight them. Like I said, they’re family to him.”

“The Empire is not just Roan Fel,” she pointed out.

“The Moff Council,” he snorted. “I guess they could outvote Fel. In theory.”

"And in theory, how do you think that match-up would end?"

"I can't say. We could draw a hundred worlds into the Empire. They'd bring allies with them, ships and resources. And if the Imperial Knights fight the Jedi, well, our Force-users are soldiers. Theirs sit around and meditate all day."

"And despoil worlds with the Vong."

"Yes, that too." Rulf swallowed more wine. "What scheme are you working on this time, Nyna?"

"I merely wanted to know how the military view this situation."

"I assumed that's why you asked me here. I know you didn't come to ask about our daughter."

Another child, another bit of detritus cast-off as she continued her ascent. It had been easier the second time. "How *is* Gunn?" she asked, faintly interested.

Rulf gave one dry laugh. "Last week the headmaster called my office at naval headquarters telling me she'd been disciplined for beating up three boys during lunch break."

Nyna smirked. "So you're proud of her, then?"

"Aye, you could say that." He smiled reluctantly. Smiling looked weird for Rulf; his blunt face was better fit for a scowl.

"Well, you always wanted a boy. It seems like you're raising one in spirit."

"One can only hope. I'd hate for her to end up some slinking schemer like her mother."

Rulf's insults never got to her like Kol's did. She responded by finishing her wine-glass and smiling. "There seems small chance of that. Like father, like daughter, as they say."

"Quite. I've always wondered what *yours* was like."

Her lips flattened to a frown. Sometimes Rulf had an almost Kol-like ability to stumble on the truth. She'd never known her father; all she had was holo-images and stories from her now-deceased mother. She knew he had been a spy, though, and when Davek Fel had wrestled the fracturing Empire into submission, Damien Corde had picked the wrong side to work for. It had gotten him killed, though

she'd never learned exactly how. In engineering her ascent she'd done everything to learn from her father's successes and mistakes both.

"Perhaps," Calixte said, "I'll check in on Gunn one day."

"I doubt you'd like that. She's not very fond of you," Rulf said cheerily. "And she's not afraid to throw the first punch."

Just as well, Calixte thought. It was best if she left Rulf and Gunn behind as she'd left Kol and Cade. When you had no one to drag you down, it was much easier to keep climbing up.

From what little Elliah had seen so far, Hapes had changed a great deal from the planet she'd known as a child.

To be fair, what she had known had been the hermetic, carefully circumscribed world of the Fountain Palace under Demia Lohr. As a distant relative of the old queen, Elliah had known blinding luxury and nothing about the lives of normal citizens. She'd been eight years old when Demia's granddaughter had seized the throne and changed everything. Serissa's bloody purge of Hapes' ancient aristocracy had nearly claimed Elliah and her brother Hogrum, but they'd gone into hiding with Serissa's other enemies. Eventually the Jedi and the Empire combined to oust Queen Serissa and her Sith allies, and it was in that way that Elliah first met a young Imperial prince named Roan Fel.

Serissa and the Sith were long gone. So were the scheming nobles. Hapes was a representative democracy now, with a parliament of elected women and even the occasional man. The Fountain Palace had been turned into a house of state, with a congressional chamber and wings full of bureaucrats, and on her rare returns to Hapes, Elliah barely recognized her childhood home. As a visiting monarch on an official visit, Elliah was granted an extravagant suite in the former palace's guest wing. Whether they knew it or not, her hosts had placed her with a room not far from the one in which she'd spent her childhood. It brought no nostalgia. Hapes had changed too much, and so had she.

After the first night she got down to business. Leaving all her official complement at the former palace, aside from the

two Imperial Knights assigned to bodyguard her, she was taken to see a place that, for all its grandeur, had not existed when she'd last been on Hapes. The mausoleum erected in honor of Allana Djo was all the more impressive for the fact that she'd only been reigning monarch for a matter of weeks. Yet in defeating Serissa Lohr and subsequently handing her crown over to an elected government, Allana had done more to change Hapes than the hundreds of other rulers who'd locked the Consortium in stagnant isolation for centuries. In a much smaller way, she'd changed Elliah's life as well.

"She was a humble woman, for all she accomplished," Elliah said as she walked along the edge of the arena. Her two Knights lingered far behind, out of earshot. The raised marble drum containing Allana Djo's mortal remains rested at the heart of the open-air circular chamber. "I wonder if she'd have liked this... ostentation."

That drew a faint smile from the woman she walked with. Tanith Zel had been Allana's chosen successor twenty-seven years ago and had led the Hapan senate for nearly a decade thereafter. Unlike the nobles of old, she didn't try to hide the worry-lines on her face and creases at her eyes.

"Allana knew symbols are the key part of politics," Tanith said.

Elliah knew too. It was a maxim of her mother-in-law. "What is this place a symbol of?"

"The new generation of Hapans remembers Allana as the person who fought her whole life to take back her crown, then gave it away." Tanith smiled again, that tight, world-weary, satisfied smile. "This is a shrine to that ideal: knowing when to take power, and when to set it aside."

"The old nobles didn't know when to do either."

"Exactly."

Elliah craned her neck back and looked at the high fluted pillars framing, then the mausoleum itself. "They say her actual body is in there."

"That's right."

"So she didn't... fade into the Force."

"Some Jedi leave bodies behind when they die. Others don't. We Hapans value the remains of our dead, especially

our queens. I like to think Allana left hers behind deliberately, so she could be properly honored.” Tanith gestured to the lofty pillars. “Her last duty to our people.”

Elliah frowned. “I didn’t realize that was possible.”

Tanith regarded her. “You’d know better than me.”

She wished that were true. Until she was sixteen she hadn’t known the Jedi as anything but bogeymen from stories, and the Force as a vague myth. Even after decades training to use her power as an Imperial Knight under the firm mentorship of her mother-in-law, the powers she possessed were still so much a mystery.

“Perhaps,” Elliah said, “I’ll find out eventually.”

Tanith’s mouth went flat. “A long time from now, I hope. You’re still so young.”

She didn’t feel young. She was in her mid-forties now, with a young daughter and an interstellar Empire to help run. The unlikely arc of her life had been escape from an old, stagnant royal family into a new and vital one.

It was, she’d learned, a very strange galaxy.

“So,” Tanith sighed, “Enough niceties, yes? You came to talk about the Jedi crisis.”

“That what they’re calling it here?”

“Not exactly. But the Jedi are being talked about as much as the Yuuzhan Vong. And not in flattering terms.”

Elliah looked at the grand memorial to a Jedi queen and wondered whether symbols were as powerful as they said. “The Empire wants to make sure its response to this crisis is in lock-step with Hapes.”

“Is that a request from your husband?”

“It’s a request from us both.”

Another weary smile from Tanith. “It’s been a while since I left office, but I still know politics. The Empire is vastly larger than the Hapes Consortium. It’s our biggest trading partner. It liberated us from a Sith queen and has invested heavily in rebuilding the same navy it smashed during the war. It does not, however, decide official government policy.”

“We don’t want to dictate anything. We want to keep a united front. There’s no telling how the Alliance will react or

who they'll hold responsible. That's all the more reason for Hapes and the Empire to hold together."

"What does the Empire plan to do? The Alliance's worlds were poisoned, not yours. You could easily sit out whatever's coming."

"That's exactly what we plan to do."

Tanith regarded her thoughtfully. "I don't suppose your husband is keen to pitch his Imperial Knights against the Jedi."

"He is not."

"And the Vong?"

"There is no proof they're responsible."

Tanith snorted. "They're certainly the likely candidate. Even if it was just some rogue shapers, they still did incalculable damage, just like a hundred years ago. The Jedi would be fools to stand with them. Frankly, the Empire would be fools to stand with the Jedi."

"We're standing *apart*," Elliah insisted.

"So you want to remain neutral in whatever happens next?"

"We want to see justice done, but we will not act hastily."

"A prudent course," said Tanith, "And probably one our government will follow. With or without your asking. The Hapan view of Jedi has improved, but we have no more love for the Vong than anyone. But it's the Alliance's worlds that were despoiled, not ours."

"You're sure your senate will see it that way?"

One more weary smile. "Democracy can be fickle, but so could our queens. In this case, yes, I think I can guarantee that Hapes will sit out whatever's coming next... unless it comes to our doorstep."

"I can't picture it coming to that."

"Neither can I, at least not right now. But who can say?" Tanith looked pointedly at the great monument erected for a woman who spent her whole life fighting for a crown, all to give it up. "History takes unlikely turns."

Elliah knew that as well as anyone. She nodded in silence.

As the two Hapans talked, two Imperial Knights watched from a distance. The women looked tiny against the giant

mausoleum and high pillars, miniscule against the grandeur. Nonetheless, Eshkar Niin's attention was firmly fixed on his Empress. He could feel her in the Force, faint but firmly, and noted soft relief.

"I believe our trip has been a successful one," the horned Iktotchi told his apprentice.

Antares Draco looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"The Empress came to Hapes seeking an accord. I think she's found it."

The young human's face screwed tight beneath its crown of dark-brown hair. "I will... take your word for it, Master."

Niin laughed lightly. "In time you'll grow deeper attuned to the Force. You'll be able to sense thoughts and emotions, even from a distance."

"I hope so, Master." Draco was clearly feeling humbled, but he tried a smile. "You've been doing this so much longer than I."

It was more than that. Nearly thirty years ago, Niin had been the first of his race to enlist in the Imperial Knights. He'd not been born in Imperial territory, but when he'd discovered his Force-sensitivity he'd felt far more drawn to Emperor Fel's order than the Jedi Knights, which to him still seemed weak-willed and disorganized, technically separate from the Alliance but awkwardly half-joined. The Imperial Knights had offered him order, discipline, and most of all purpose.

As an apprentice Knight he'd been an alien, but he'd found unlikely companionship with a young Hapan woman who'd joined herself to the Empire despite being an outsider. That she was, as other apprentices had said, 'attached' to the new emperor was not an impediment to friendship. As a result of their bond, he was especially attuned to her in the Force and could sense her thoughts even from a distance.

As the Hapan women continued to speak at the monument's base, Draco shifted a little restlessly. The human was always like that, eager to *do* something, impatient when he couldn't. Niin had been much the same when he was younger. Draco's ambition was admirable, but he needed to learn focus.

Niin breathed in and looked at the clear blue sky. "Apprentice, what do you want to come of this?"

Draco blinked. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do. The galaxy is at a tipping point. What happens next may affect more than just the Yuuzhan Vong and the Jedi. It could bring change to us all."

Draco equivocated. "The Empress is here to keep the Empire out of any conflict."

"That is what she and the Emperor want. What do *you* want?"

"I want to serve the Empire. I will do whatever they ask."

"So long as they remained faithful to the light side of the Force," Niin reminded.

"Of course, Master."

Niin smiled gently. "Do not be ashamed of ambition. Properly harnessed, it can be a cause for good. Conflict gives us a chance to prove ourselves in ways we can't during peacetime."

Draco frowned. "You'd... welcome a war?"

"I welcome justice. Someone needs to help accountable for what happened. I don't hope to fight the Jedi. I don't hope to fight the Vong. But the Empire stands for justice and security. We should never forget that."

Draco looked at the two small figures by the mausoleum. "Have you spoken to the Empress about such things?"

"The Empress always knows my thoughts," Niin said, which was true save for one final secret. "I am her Knight. I will do as I am commanded. But duty doesn't mean we can't have opinions of our own."

"I see, Master." He did not sound like he did.

Niin favored his apprentice with a tiny smile. "That's not license to speak plainly to the Emperor. Only Master Sinde gets that privilege. But perhaps, in time, you'll earn it."

"That's a long way away."

"Indeed. You have much to learn before you become a full Knight. But in times of conflict, lessons come quickly."

Master and apprentice waited in silence. Niin felt a touch of satisfaction and finality from the empress and watched her walk back to her Knights alone.

When she got close, Elliah said, “I think we have what we need, but I’ll talk to a few senators before we go.”

“Of course, Empress,” said Niin. “Should we return to the Fountain Palace?”

“Yes, until our next meeting. Come.”

She started walking away from the memorial. Her bodyguards fell in on either side. As they walked Niin said in a low voice, “You seem relieved, Majesty.”

“I am. It seems like the Hapans’ isolationist instincts are kicking in again. Which is fortunate for us.”

Perhaps, he thought. Perhaps. He’d joined the Imperial Knights because he was impressed by their front-line heroism in the war Davek Fel had waged against hard-liners who’d dreamed of resurrecting Palpatine’s oppressive, human supremacist empire. Perhaps because of how he’d lost his father and brother, the current emperor was sometimes more cautious and reticent than Niin liked.

Still, he’d obey. He’d sworn his oath, but that wasn’t the real reason, not if he was being honest with himself. He allowed a sidelong glance that lingered on Elliah Fel’s profile; a pale elegant face, framed by the sheen of jet-black hair. The sight alone commanded him. He’d known from the start that Elliah Chalk was ‘attached’ to Roan Fel. That hadn’t stopped him from loving her deep down, for all these many years.

Chapter Five

Since the escape from Wayland everything had been a whirlwind of urgent talks and tense negotiations, all aimed solely at damage control. The futility of it only came to Kol during slow moments; on long starship rides into the Core and back to Ossus. Those slow moments were crushing, but for the most part he was able to escape them by worrying about whatever meeting lay ahead.

Now, after speaking with the Jedi Council, the Alliance leadership, and Roan Fel, he had nothing to do but face the unfaceable.

By the time he, his mother, and Arlen arrived, the Alliance delegation had already spent a day in the temple. Scientists combed through data. Trained criminal investigators talked with Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong shapers alike. A similarly-sized team was already en route to Zonama Sekot. The Alliance people were coldly polite, and it was only through the Force that Kol got hints of their thoughts. Most were actively suspicious of the Yuuzhan Vong and some seemed suspicious of the Jedi too. They were hunting for facts that would incriminate, not exonerate. Kol had already faced skepticism and outright mistrust from the leaders of the Alliance and the Empire, but seeing it from common citizens, rather than politicians playing politicians' games, was striking. It drove home the ultimate failure of a project that should have raised esteem of the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong throughout the galaxy.

"They took all my shapers aside individually for questions, and then all the project's *Jeedai*," Nei Rin told him once the Alliance people had finally departed, having given no clear sign what they would tell the triumvirate. "We were all treated like criminals."

"What happened to those hundred worlds *was* a crime." Kol tried to summon charity for his persecutors.

Nei Rin tilted her head. "Do you mean it was intentional?"

"Don't you? Roan Fel, the triumvirs, they all said the same thing. One world going bad, or two, that might be excusable. But for the terraforming to go bad on all them, at the same time, *except* Ossus? No, someone did this deliberately, to harm the Jedi."

"Does the Force tell you that?"

Kol took a deep breath. He didn't know. "Do you have any better idea?" he asked earnestly.

"I am not sure." Nei Rin looked at her long-fingered shapers' hands. "I have been... considering the possibility that the Gods have betrayed us. A trick like this would be worthy of Yun-Harla. Or perhaps we have done something to draw anger from Yun-Ne'shel."

Kol watched her for a long moment. Despite all they'd done together, he sometimes forgot that Nei Rin was a true believer in her race's old gods. She saw them as disembodied powers with sentient agency, influencing the lives of mortals. It had always been hard for Kol to take literally, but he tried to remember the words of his childhood teacher, Master Veila, who'd supposed that the Yuuzhan Vong Gods and the Force could both be fundamental misunderstandings of something greater than either. Alternatively, the Gods could be seen as a distorted metaphor for the will of the Force, which was easier for Kol to imagine but brought no more comfort.

"I can't say what the Gods will," he muttered. Just months ago he'd been sure the Force- or the Gods, or whatever name one used- was urging him on to complete the Ossus Project, to heal a hundred worlds and bind the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong and the greater galaxy together for the betterment of all. That conviction had been with him most of his life, but now

he wondered if that conviction, and the life it had commanded, were all vanity and nothing more.

"Perhaps we have been prideful," Nei Rin said, as though reading his thoughts. "I thought the Gods *wanted* this, but perhaps that is not so. Perhaps we need to remain exiled on Zonama Sekot for a century more before we can atone for what we've done."

"You were trying to atone. The Gods wouldn't hold that against you."

"Can you speak surely of the will of the Gods, Kol Skywalker? No. You cannot. No one can. A hundred years ago our priests were sure the Gods meant for us to eradicate the infidels... But we were led astray. I've hated those old, dead priests for what they did. Now I wonder if I've become what I've hated."

Kol crouched in front of her and took one long-fingered hand in his own. "Nei Rin, our intentions were *good*. We have to believe that."

"And look where they have gotten us. I've sent most of our shapers back to Zonama Sekot. I've given the instruction that Sekot is to activate its hyperdrive engines and jump to a new location once the Alliance delegates are gone."

It was a dire move, but probably a wise one. "I understand."

"Not even the *Jeedai* are to know its location. It will watch things from afar... and decide when to make contact."

Kol had the most important years of his life on Zonama Sekot, and it pained him to know he might not set foot on the verdant world again, but he nodded. "You made the right choice."

Nei Rin carefully withdrew her hand from his and asked, "What shall we do now, besides wait for the Alliance to pass judgment on us?"

"Do you believe the project failed because of sabotage? Or because we upset the Gods?"

Nei Rin blinked. "Why does it have to be one or the other?"

She had him there. "I think we need to look for saboteurs. Maybe the Alliance will find something, maybe not. I think

someone wanted to wreck this project to harm both our peoples. It could have been a rogue shaper, or even a Jedi, but I think it was some outside power.”

“Where can we look?”

“Everywhere,” he said. “Come on. Let’s look at the scientists we brought in from the outside to work on the Project. It’s a place to start.”

To the Jedi, the living planet of Zonama Sekot was a marvel that challenged their ideas of what the Force was and what it was capable of. The lush green planet, a seed of the original Yuuzhan’tar and made in its image, possessed a single governing consciousness, the cumulative product of all the life in its biosphere, from the blades of grass to the sentient Yuuzhaan Vong, Ferroans, and humans who made cities in its valleys and plains. There was nothing else like it in the galaxy, and the living planet’s Force powers beggared and mystified the Jedi.

To Khat Lah it was simply home, and he’d been away for two long years. Much had changed within him, and much had changed in the galaxy beyond, but he was comforted to see the settlement of the Middle Distance was much the same as he remembered. The buildings jutting out of the valley’s steep walls were made of harvested wood from the surrounding mountains or grown from yorik coral into domes or corkscrew towers. The streets were filled with pedestrians and animal-pulled carts instead of landspeeders and droids, and there was nothing in the clear blue sky except scattered avians. It was a simple, calming place, but it also reminded him painfully that the Ossus Project had tried to remake a hundred worlds in the image of this one. Instead it had made a hundred horrors.

While Alliance investigators swarmed over as much of the planet as allowed, Khat Lah joined Nepri Dal, Nei Rin’s trusted assistant shaper, in speaking with Zonama Sekot’s leaders. The sentient world could interact with the beings on its surface by manifesting itself as one of them. It did so rarely and arbitrarily, and like the vast majority of Yuuzhan Vong, Khat Lah had never seen Sekot’s image himself. Most

affairs on the planet were managed by a tripartite council consisting of one Yuuzhan Vong, one Jedi, and one of the blue-skinned humanoid Ferroans who'd settled the planet two centuries before the others.

"The master shaper made herself very clear," Nepri Dal said as he and Khat Lah stood in the council's modest damutek. "We must leave this part of space as soon as the Alliance investigators depart. It is the only way to keep the planet safe."

"That won't win us trust points with the Alliance," muttered the lead Ferroan, an older female named Fennish.

The leader of Zonama's resident Jedi, a black-haired human name Pilar Bekk, said, "I think it's the right choice. Our priority is our own survival. Individuals from the Alliance have meant us harm before, even when the government doesn't."

"This time the government might," agreed the council's third member, the aged priestess Komral. She bowed her turbaned head at the other two Yuuzhan Vong. "Thank you for bringing this to our attention. We will do as asked."

"Masters Nei Rin and Skywalker are also convinced the Ossus Project failed because of sabotage," Nepri Dal said. "They will continue to investigate, as so should we."

"Did the master shaper instruct you to?" asked Komral.

Nepri Dal nodded. "She said I am to remain on Zonama Sekot and lead the shapers here."

"Very well. The Jedi will assist you any way we can." Bekk looked to Khat Lah. "What instructions do *you* have?"

Khat Lah hesitated a moment before admitting, "I was given no further instructions, Master *Jeedai*. I was only to deliver the message."

"Very well. Then you may consider whether or not to remain on Zonama Sekot. Thank you again for delivering your message."

Khat Lah nodded after a surprised pause. He'd spent the long outbound ride to Zonama Sekot acclimating himself to the idea that he was coming home to stay. While it was refreshing to be back here, any joy in homecoming was muted by the feeling that this was exile instead. The work

he'd been doing on Duro had become his life over the past two years. Now that it had failed calamitously, returning to Zonama Sekot felt like punishment.

After meeting the councilors, Khat Lah went to see Besh Lah and Vua Yaght, who'd accompanied him from Ossus. He told his fellow warriors everything that had been said, including the choice he was unexpectedly facing.

"If Zonama Sekot is in danger, we should stay and protect our home," reasoned Vua Yaght.

"By leaving this place we'll move out of danger. The Jedi and our kin on Ossus will be more threatened," said Besh Lah.

"We need to find who truly sabotaged the project," said Khat Lah. "No one is safe until we've done that."

"That may be something only shapers or Jedi can find out," said Vua Yaght.

"We can still do our part," Besh Lah said. "To flee when things become difficult is dishonorable."

Vua Yaght rankled at the word. "From Zonama or Ossus, we can still go after our enemies. Here, at least, we can defend our people."

"There is no dishonor in staying here," Khat Lah said to defuse the tension, but without conviction. In considering his choice, his thoughts kept drawing away from his people and always toward his duty to the young Jedi boy whose father had died in his place.

There might be honor in staying with Zonama Sekot, but there would be none in abandoning the boy. He didn't know what he could actually *do* for the young Jedi; certainly he could not teach him the ways of the Force. He could still watch over Eli Horn, even as he worked with Nei Rin and the Jedi to discover the truth behind this disaster.

He knew, deep down, that if he did otherwise, the guilt would fester like a disease until it crippled him.

"I will go back to Ossus," Khat Lah announced suddenly, drawing stunned looks from his companions. "I have a debt I must repay. I cannot do that on Zonama. But do not let my choice affect yours."

Besh Lah's eyes narrowed. He probably suspected his creche-mate's true reasons. "I will go back with you as well."

"Be careful with your choices," Vua Yaght warned. "Zonama Sekot will jump away, and the Jedi will not know where to find it. If this crisis gets worse, Sekot may never reveal its location. You may never see the homeworld again."

It was a sobering thought. Just being here for a few days had felt like a return to enveloping arms, but at the same time Khat Lah's thoughts kept drawing out toward the galaxy beyond. During his two years away he'd only seen scattered bits of it, but those alone contained a vastness far beyond anything he'd imagined during his years growing up on Zonama. Nei Rin had said that a century of insularity had been enough for their people, and that they needed to go out into the larger galaxy and prove to the rest of its people that the Yuuzhan Vong had changed and could now be a force for good. Fleeing deeper into the Unknown Regions was necessary to protect their race, but it would not accomplish Nei Rin's worthy goal.

"I have a duty that can only be done on Ossus," Khat Lah told them. "But again, you must each make your own choice."

"You know mine," Besh Lah said firmly.

Vua Yaght looked between them. He gave a weary sigh, then surprised them by saying, "I will go as well."

"Truly?" asked Khat Lah. "I wouldn't make your choice for you."

"We have been together two years." Vua Yaght spread his hands. "It would be... dishonorable to leave my companions after we've been through so much."

Besh Lah grinned, bearing sharp teeth. "Then we would be honored to have you."

Vua Yaght nodded, feigning conviction he didn't quite feel. Still, Khat Lah was glad to have him along. As Vua Yaght had said, they'd worked together for a long time, three warriors fighting for the redemption of their race instead of unholy conquest. Now they battled something new: an

unseen enemy with insidious design. While duty impelled him most of all, the warrior in Khat Lah felt thrilled for the challenge.

He could only hope to prove himself worthy.

The return from a successful campaign should have been marked by celebration and relaxation, but there was none of that for the Alliance ships returning from the Outer Rim. The devastation of a hundred worlds sent shock waves across the galaxy. In the military, grief and desire for justice collided with anxiety over another, larger war.

As captain of the *Indomitable*, Jaius Yorub knew that out of the thirty-five thousand officers and enlisted beings serving aboard his ship, over four hundred had been born to populations exiled from their ancestral homes by the Vong. Everyone on the ship knew and worked with someone for whom this disaster was painfully personal. During the time *Indomitable* spent parked over the Core's garrison world of Anaxes, Yorub tried to take a reading of the crew by asking his lieutenants. All of them reported the same thing; every crew section on the ship was afflicted by the same mix of surprise, anxiety, anger, fear, and restlessness.

The last one surprised Yorub a little. After returning from the Outer Rim, all of Admiral Stazi's battle group was put on standby notice, which meant all were to hold position at Anaxes until further notice and no crew would be allowed to take leave. Keeping the ships jam-packed with soldiers who'd just finished one fight and anticipated another didn't do much more morale, but there was no arguing with Fleet Command. He'd expected a few crew members to make petitions for critical leave, citing real or feigned family emergencies as an excuse to get away from what could be a potentially explosive situation, but none of them did. People were surprised, anxious, angry, and fearful, but they also wanted to be a part of whatever happened next. It made Yorub proud of his soldiers, and all the more fearful of what might come next.

He couldn't ask Stazi. The Duro went down to Anaxes as soon as *Indomitable* arrived and spent days meeting with

Supreme Commander Lekhwash and the other senior admirals. On the way back to the Core he'd acted pointedly reserved; the one time Yorub had attempted to pry out his opinions on his homeworld's disaster he'd pointedly ended the conversation. Knowing Stazi, he'd be making his opinions known to the higher-ups right, but what those opinions were and what effect they'd have, Yorub could only wait and see.

When Stazi did return it was after two and a half days on the planet. Once his shuttle landed he went straight to his private office, where he requested Yorub join him and present a summary of *Indomitable's* battle-readiness.

"The 'yards here are giving us the last bits of fix-up we couldn't get at the civilian stations at Terminus," Yorub summarized after running through the details. "All the other ships in the fleet are battle-ready."

"And the crews?" Stazi sat behind his desk and drummed green fingers on its metal top.

"Tense, sir. Angry. Afraid. But they're all waiting to do their part." He left a question in his tone, asking what their part would be.

"That's good to know, but I'm afraid they'll have to wait a little longer," Stazi said. "Per Fleet Command, we'll refrain from deployment at this time."

"The entire fleet, sir, or just ours?"

"We'll hold over Anaxes. Admirals Petan and Nict will be distributing their battle groups to the damaged planets."

"For what purpose? There's nothing *on* those planets except Vongformed monsters."

"Quite," Stazi growled. "However, there's no guarantee the Vong won't come out and make a claim on them. And we also want to prevent those planets becoming rallying points for angry militias."

Yorub had heard how one such militia had captured and killed a Jedi fleeing Duro. He still had no reading on the admiral's position there and pried a little. "Which is the bigger concern? Some citizens' fleet going for vengeance or the Vong?"

"Both are our concern. The Alliance exists to keep the peace."

Keeping peace, not promoting justice, Yorub thought. Most of his life he'd thought the two went hand-in-hand. That was one of many trusted notions that had been upended in the past few weeks. "Does Fleet Command think the Vong have a viable attack force?"

"They never have before. Our inspectors on Zonama Sekot report no signs of a military build-up either, but for all we know there might be whole planets in the Unknown Regions filled with bellicose Vong."

"If it *was* a rogue Vong faction, what does that mean for the rest?"

"Undetermined," Stazi grimaced and slumped in his chair. Yorub didn't see that often; he'd grown used to thinking of the admiral as a Duro in motion, always *acting*, often brazenly. Dejection didn't suit him. Yet another presumption overturned.

"This is a messy, messy business, Jaius." Stazi stared down at his desk. "Someone *must* be held accountable. The damning part is, we just don't know."

Yorub decided to be a little brazen himself. "Do *you* think the Jedi were involved, sir?"

Stazi sat up. "Do I think they invited hundreds of Vong shapers back to the planets their ancestors despoiled a century ago? Yes. Do I think they recklessly made huge promises about resurrecting dead planets? Oh yes. And do I think they set themselves up for failure by raising too much hope? I certainly do." He sighed. The anger drained from his voice when he said, "The Jedi are many things. Exclusive, secretive, arrogant. But they are not malicious."

"Every Vongformed planet was ruined except Ossus," Yorub said. "Every single one."

"Yes. A little *too* obvious, isn't it? It's like a big finger pointed at the Jedi. They're not malicious and they're not stupid. They wouldn't set themselves up like that. Someone else might, though."

"Like who?"

"I don't know. Someone hoping to incite violence against the Jedi, or the Vong. Neither is bereft of enemies." He fixed Yorub with a red-eyed stare. "Whatever the truth is, we won't be the ones to discover it. So there's no point in dwelling what's beyond our control."

"Of course, sir." Yorub straightened.

"We're soldiers. We'll keep the peace and we'll do what Fleet Command tells us to do."

"Which for now... is sit tight and stress out."

That earned him a tiny smile. "Apparently so. Is there anything else?"

"Not at the moment." Yorub didn't move for the door. "Though I think you should know, sir... The crew is stressed. They're anxious and shocked and fearful and all of that--"

"But still loyal."

"Yes. And I think you're part of that."

"You've never had to flatter me before, Jaius."

"It's not that, sir. Of all the senior fleet admirals, you're the only one from a world that's been ruined."

"I am not *from* Duro," Stazi said, with a little sigh. "I was born on Abregado-Rae. No living Duros were actually born on Duro."

"But you're still affected by all this personally. And for all our people who've been affected too, they can look at their commander and know he's in the same situation as them. It means a lot, sir."

"I've always tried to be an example to my people, but I never thought I'd be one like this." Stazi drummed fingers on desktop again. "Can I tell you something slightly personal?"

Yorub blinked his big eyes. "Please, sir."

"I never wanted to go back to Duro. Before the Vong got to it, that planet was a polluted, toxic waste dump. Most Duros in the galaxy weren't born on the homeworld then, either. My species has always been spread across the stars."

Yorub nodded. He knew that; it was so different from the Sullustans, who were far-flung but retained a cultural affiliation with the hot tunnels and dark warrens of the homeworld. Like most Sullustans out in the galaxy, he still hoped to retire there one day.

"The Vong turned Duro from a garbage heap to a lush world, not that we asked them to." Stazi went on. "Only then did the back-to-Duro movement get started. I thought those people were sentimental. Backward-looking. And then the Jedi declared they were going to make it habitable again..." He shook his head. "*Hope*, Jaius, can be a dangerous thing."

"And you're angry at the Jedi for giving it?"

"Not angry," Stazi said. Yorub wasn't sure if he believed him. "But in doing something so bold, they risked bringing down disaster, not just on themselves but on all the people whose worlds they were meddling in."

"It's coming down on us all now," Yorub muttered.

"Indeed. But as soldiers of the Alliance, it's our job to hold it off as best we can."

"You're probably right, sir. And I think all the soldiers in our fleet would appreciate hearing it from you. For morale's sake."

Stazi considered. "Morale."

"They could use any scrap of it they can get."

"Then I'll see what kind of statement I can put together. Thank you for thinking of that, Jaius. Sometimes I get lost trying to find the bigger picturing. Taking care of the crew is just as important."

"That's what a captain's for, sir."

"To take stock of the crew or needle the admiral?"

Yorub's jowls flexed in a smile. "Both."

"I thought so. Please keep needling me in the future."

"Thank you, sir." Yorub smiled and marched out of the office. He liked to think he and the admiral made an effective team, even as they sometimes confounded each other. Stazi may have been right to warn against too much hope, but he was wrong too. Sometimes hope was all you had to get you through the darkest times. He'd have to point that out to the admiral, one day.

The morning before Khat Lah was set to join the Alliance investigators in returning to the known galaxy, he woke early and wandered outside into the predawn light. He'd slept poorly and was now simultaneously tired and restless. Since

making the decision to go back to Ossus, he'd found himself anxious to be on his way.

An hour before sunrise the Middle Distance was empty and still. Domed damuteks and corkscrew spires were like shadows layered in violet-tinted mist. Khat Lah walked through empty streets to the edge of the settlement, then up a hillside path until he'd reached a point where he could look down on the buildings as they clustered inside the valley. The sky was clear overhead; in the west it was still pure black but panning eastward it turned blue to purple to scarlet, with a hint of gold beyond the opposite hills.

Khat Lah stared at the coming dawn. He felt himself calm at the sight of it; it was the last sunrise he'd see on Zonama Sekot, maybe for a long time, but he was glad to have a bright one to see him off.

He was taken by surprise when he noticed a figure at the edge of his vision. He was shocked again to see Nei Rin standing a meter away from him, looking at the same dawn light.

"Master Shaper," he gasped, "I thought you were on Ossus."

Nei Rin turned her head, looked him in the eye, and smiled tightly, as though she were waiting patiently for him to get it.

And he got it. He didn't believe it, because he'd never thought it would happen to him, but there was no other explanation he could think of. He'd heard that, when appearing to its people, Sekot usually took the forms of those long-dead, but it seemed to have chosen to appear to Khat Lah as someone he would recognize.

More staggering than that: It had *chosen* Khat Lah.

A holy dread filled him and he dropped to his knees. He prostrated himself before Sekot, face nearly in the dirt. "I am not worthy," he said, because he wasn't. He was a failure, voluntarily exiling himself from the homeworld in a desperate attempt to reclaim his honor.

"Stand, Khat Lah." The voice sounded just like Nei Rin's. "Don't be afraid to look at me. I'm not one of your gods."

He was in no way sure of that. Yuuzhan Vong, from priests to extolled, had spent the past century trying to understand

exactly *what* Sekot was. It was the child of the original Yuuzhan'tar, yes, but they struggled whether to place it in the pantheon of existing gods or to treat it as something else; a blessed link between mundane and divine, perhaps. From what little he understood of Jedi theology, they were similarly confounded.

Nonetheless, Khat Lah rose on wobbly legs and looked at the familiar face, with its pale unscarred skin and violet tattoos. This simulacrum really did look like Nei Rin. He understood that, while Sekot had originally only been able to manifest in Force-visions to Jedi, it had learned to assemble actual physical forms from its constituent atoms to appear to its Force-blind children. If he dared reach out and touch this avatar it would touch him back.

But he couldn't bring himself to move forward, not a step. The tiny smile still graced Nei Rin's face as Sekot asked, "You're wondering why I'm here, aren't you?"

"I... I would not dare to interrogate-"

"You have every right to ask. Unquestioning obedience has never served your people well."

"I... I just wonder now... Why me? What have I done to deserve this honor?"

The smile wilted. "Is it an honor?"

Khat Lah could think of nothing to say.

"Perhaps I am placing a burden on you. But maybe you'd consider *that* an honor too."

Sekot stared at him, as though expecting an answer. He managed to stutter, "I-I don't understand."

Nei Rin's form took two steps toward him and stopped within arm's reach. "You're going to have a difficult road ahead of you, Khat Lah. In your peoples' old religion, pain was a conduit to the gods. By enduring its embrace, one gained their favor. That can be a dangerous way of thinking, but sometimes- just sometimes- it really can be the path to greatness."

"I don't understand," he repeated.

"You will. But not yet. That will come later." Sekot reached out. Nei Rin's fingertips touched the side of his face. The caress lasted only a moment but a shudder ran through

his entire body. As the hand withdrew he swayed on both legs, and for a moment felt like he would lose consciousness.

"I'm giving you a gift I've long wanted to give your people," Sekot explained.

"What gift?" Khat Lah rasped as clarity returned.

"Be patient. I've done my part. In time, hopefully, you'll do the rest."

He still understood nothing. Sekot, the mysterious conduit between gods and mortals, insisted it was giving him a gift. He couldn't argue with something like that, only wonder. "But... why me?"

Nei Rin smiled again; this time it was a sad smile. "You are what your people *need* to be."

"What do you mean? Is it because I'm going back into the galaxy? To help the Jedi?"

"That, and more."

"What else?"

Instead of answering, Sekot turned its head and looked eastward. Gold light spilled across Nei Rin's face. "Look. A new day had started."

Khat Lah looked and squinted against the new day's glare. When he looked back, Sekot was gone and he was alone on the ridge. His legs went weak beneath him. He sat down on the slope to watch the dawn and wondered if he'd just experienced truth, an illusion, or something different altogether.

Chapter Six

The blue glow of the holo-display and its precise constructions of three-dimensional light should have seemed incongruous against the ancient stone walls inside the Sith catacomb, but strangely they did not. To Relik K'sharn they felt, instead, like an inner fire giving new life to things once dead.

A woman reporter on the holo was detailing the latest news to rock the galaxy: a joint declaration by seventy-eight of the hundred afflicted worlds that they would invoke the Anaxes Treaty of mutual defense, and were calling for help against a Yuuzhan Vong attack. Those worlds were all member states of the Galactic Alliance but Coruscant, fully enmeshed in its investigation of the failed Vongforming project, had yet to provide a response.

K'sharn was self-aware enough to realize that the Sith- his captors, his hosts- may have been using their invisible powers to affect his mind and *make* him warm to their overtures. Apparently he'd been doing the same to his own followers for years without realizing it. The concentrated efforts of all these Force-users could surely mold his mind.

And yet, as he watched news broadcasts, all depicting the rising anger against the Yuuzhan Vong and their Jedi allies, K'sharn believed it was more than that. From all they'd told him- assuming it was true- the Sith were not looking for a mindless pawn but a true-believer ally, and that belief could only come from within. More, there was every reason for him to be impressed by the Sith.

"All of this is your doing," he muttered, still watching the holo. "And none of them suspect."

"The Jedi believe us extinct," said the Sith on his right. "They believe they eliminated us- and Darth Krayt specifically- thirty years ago, when we allowed them to destroy our temple in the Hapes Cluster."

Two and a half meters tall, with a thin body perched on reverse-articulated legs like a bird's and a noseless face, Darth Vorkan belonged to a species called Blood Carvers, both for their curious red-stone sculptures and for their skills as assassins. Vorkan was Darth Krayt's Hand, his chief executor and assassin.

"You lured them into a trap?" K'sharn asked.

"No, but we turned a defeat into a victory," Vorkan said firmly. "I was just a child then. Lord Krayt led us to Korriban, where Darth Wyyrlok was already training Sith in secret. The Jedi, in their arrogance, believed they'd exterminated us all. It was easy for us to expand our ranks once the enemy had been lulled into false security."

"You were brought into the Sith as a child?"

"I was *born* Sith," the Blood Carver hissed. "Most of us were."

K'sharn looked to the woman on his right. Like most female Devaronians she looked almost like a Nagai, with no horns and her long black hair pulled into a topknot. "And you," he asked Darth Maladi, "Were *you* born Sith?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "My father was a Jedi. Krayt killed him when I was young and took me as his own."

She'd had to acclimate to this new life, then; this new way of thinking, acting, and being. K'sharn felt a spike of kinship for her, but reminded himself that sentiment would do no good here. "What of Krayt himself?"

"A story he'll tell you in time," said Vorkan. "But only if he thinks you're worthy."

All the more reason to prove himself. K'sharn gestured to the holo and said to Maladi, "I've been told you were the one who ruined the Ossus Project."

He'd expected a prideful smile, but Maladi nodded matter-of-fact. "I've spent all my life researching bioweaponry. I

encamped on Wayland first, right beneath the nose of Kol Skywalker. My... allies and I discovered how to turn his dream against him. I spread the information to our agents on ninety-nine other worlds, and together we despoiled them.”

“The Jedi must know they’ve been sabotaged.”

“Yes, but how can they suspect us if they don’t know we exist?” That got a wry smile out of her. “They will chase false leads to every corner of the galaxy before they realize what we’ve done to them. In the meantime the cries of righteous vengeance will grow louder and louder. Half the galaxy will be screaming for the Yuuzhan Vong’s blood.”

“The Jedi may throw them to the mob.”

“Not the Jedi,” said Darth Vorkan. “Their moral code would never allow them to betray an innocent, even when they stand at the edge of extinction.”

K’sharn could appreciate the cool intellect that went into this kind of scheme, but it was the thought of violent conquest that stirred him. “When will you take the war directly to the Jedi?”

“In time,” said Maladi. “I’ve taken steps to ensure a confrontation between the Empire and the Alliance. The Jedi will join, out of that same sense of moral obligation.”

“And then *we* will make our presence known,” said K’sharn.

“*We*?” asked Darth Vorkan.

He’s spoken without thinking, but there was no point in drawing back. “That is why I’m here, isn’t it? To join your crusade against the Jedi?”

“And what do you think you can bring to the One Sith?”

Vorkan put an intimidating growl to his voice, but K’sharn knew that if the Sith didn’t see his value they wouldn’t have gone so far to retrieve him. “I am a Nagai warleader. I have commanded armies and ravaged worlds. I can lead the charge against your enemies.”

“You covet my position as Hand?” asked Vorkan.

“No.” After he said it K’sharn realized he’d lied.

“Your vanity betrays you,” Maladi said from his other side, voice soft and smooth. “To be One Sith you must put aside

personal ambition. You must seek power, but only as it strengthens us all.”

He looked at Vorkan. “You said you would train me. I am ready to be trained.”

“Are you truly?”

K’sharn knew it wasn’t an idle question. These Sith had shown him all they were willing to show. He’d never had any intention of refusing their offer- they’d surely kill him- but he’d wondered how far they’d take him before he committed himself.

He looked the Blood Carver in his gold-rimmed eyes and said, “*I am* ready to become a Sith.”

Vorkan was fast. K’sharn caught his fist as it came up, but not in time to deflect it. The blow was as hard as any he’d ever taken. He staggered back, still on his feet, and raised his hands in front of his face.

The next blow was invisible and just as hard. It bent K’sharn over, and third, also invisible, smashed his shoulder and cracked his collarbone. Finally, the Blood Carver’s three-clawed feet lashed out, slammed into his chest, and pinned him to the cold stone floor.

And suddenly K’sharn was on his back, staring at the red tip of Darth Vorkan’s lightsaber. Maladi stood behind him, half-silhouetted against the blue of the still-playing holo, watching the scene with an expression of only mild interest.

Through his pain and anger, K’sharn knew that if the Sith wanted him dead they’d have done it long ago. He bared sharp teeth and said, “Is this part of a test?”

“The test is only starting.” Keeping his lightsaber just inches from K’sharn’s face, Darth Vorkan bent low and stared deeply into his eyes. “You will be remade. Starting today, Relik K’sharn is no more.”

“And then what? Will I get a Sith name, like all of you?”

Vorkan put more pressure on his chest. The pain of cracking ribs was exquisite. He bit his lip to keep from screaming.

“Say it,” Vorkan said. “Tell me Relik K’sharn is dead.”

He knew, through instinct or the Force, that if he did not he’d fail his first test and Vorkan would kill him immediately.

When he could speak through the pain he said, "Relik K'sharn is dead." And as he said it, he knew it was true. He'd been dead since the battle at Terminus and awaiting resurrection.

Vorkan relieved a little pressure from his chest. "That's very good."

"Do I have... a new name?"

"No," the Blood Carver glowered. "You *are* nothing. You will be treated as nothing and you will *be* nothing until our Master decides you are worthy of being One Sith."

"Then let me prove myself... *Make* me into one of you."

Vorkan removed his foot and placed it on the stone floor. To Maladi he asked, "Is it ready?"

"And waiting," she said.

Vorkan looked back to the battered, nameless Nagai lying panting on the ground. "This will be your first lesson. It is the agony that forged our master into the Dark Lord he is. It is called the Embrace of Pain."

"I know pain," the nameless one growled

Vorkan's hard expression wilted to show something like pity. "You've known nothing like this," he said.

Morlish Veed was clearly admiring himself as he stood in front of his bedroom's tall mirror. He had some reason to; though middle-aged he was as combat-fit as a soldier ten years younger, and the gray in his hair added a certain distinction to his blunt features. He filled out the olive-green admiral's uniform well, and he kept tugging its edges and sleeves until he was fully satisfied.

Sitting on the side of the bed, crossed legs jutting out from beneath her soft velvet robe, Nyna Calixte said, "Worried you won't look sufficiently pretty for Roan Fel?"

"It's the others on the Moff Council I need to impress." Veed patted his uniform flat and turned to look at her. "At least, that's what *you* 've been insisting."

"You'll need the support of every one of them to override Fel's veto," she said. "And you can be sure Fel will try."

"I'm not worried about Geist," Veed said, "Or Seniac. Fehlaaur is canny, but he'll blow with the wind. Kaylac and

Konrad Rus will be the tricky ones. They're usually on Fel's side."

"I've already secured the vote from Rus," Calixte said.

"I'd still like to know how you persuaded him." Veed leered.

"Not the way you think, Morlish. Just a little blackmail." She frowned politely. "Even the pious head of the Imperial Mission committed a few indiscretions in his youth. *Kaylac* is the problem."

"He's always been a toady to Fel, and his father before him." Veed's hands turned to fists at his side. "If I were Supreme Commander of the military, I'd run things much differently."

"And you will be, one day," Calixte assured. Veed's neediness was as naked as his vanity, and as easy to exploit. "For now, settle with running the Navy. And tipping the power of the Moff Council in *our* direction."

"I don't suppose you were able to bribe Kaylac."

She shook her head, spilling black hair over bare shoulder. "His ethics are beyond reproach. Alas. But there are other methods. He's an Imperial patriot, and he believes the role of the military is defending the Empire. If you can convince him the Vong are a threat, he'll join the rest of you in voting to fight." Calixte leaned forward a little. "The intelligence reports I've slipped Seniac will hint of a Yuuzhan Vong buildup in the Unknown Regions. When he brings those up in the meeting, act like you've never heard of them before. It will make your case seem more authentic and that will help convince Kaylac."

"I don't suppose it matters whether that intel is accurate."

"All the matters is getting unanimous support from the Council. From there, it will be legally impossible for Roan Fel to stop us."

"Legally. If I were him, and I were truly opposed to this, I'd change the law. Dissolve the Moff Council and run it all myself."

"Even if it started a civil war?"

"I'd make sure I was in a position into win first."

"Then it's lucky for us you're *not* the Emperor."

"Not yet," Veed added. He bent over- not deep enough to crease his pretty uniform- and gave her one kiss on the mouth. "Wish me luck, Nyna."

"Good luck," she said. "I await your results."

Veed gave her another leering look, then turned and marched out of his bedroom. Calixte waited until she heard him exit his penthouse entirely then rose from the bed. She looked out the window; it was a new morning over Ravelin, the administrative capital of the Empire. While not quite Galactic City, its impressive skyline was busy with speeder traffic slicing intersecting lines through the towering skyscrapers. She took a deep breath; the Empire had known peace for twenty-seven since Roan Fel's ascension to the throne. That would all change soon, and she'd be responsible for that.

Calixte tried to be honest with herself at all times. Was she motivated by ambition? Of course she was. Otherwise she'd have never tried that abortive marriage to Rulf Yage, nor would she have initiated her affair with Veed, itself a stepping stone toward the High Moff Council, where she hoped to sit herself one day. Her first marriage, her secret marriage to Kol Skywalker, had been a much different affair. She'd allowed sentiment to overcome her better judgment and had allowed a child to drag her further into that mess before finally, forcefully extricating herself.

Damned Jedi, she thought. Even without using their Force powers on you, they could addle your mind. She was glad to be away from them. She'd made certain not to repeat that mistake with Rulf and Gunn.

Calixte was fairly confident in her ability to control Veed, and in Veed's ability to sway the Moff Council. What troubled her now was the mysterious contact she'd made, the one who'd directed her to Ossus in advance of its despoiling and warned her again that seventy-eight of the hundred afflicted worlds had banded together to invoke the Anaxes Treaty without consulting Coruscant first. Calixte was skilled at gathering intelligence, and she'd heard rumblings of it beforehand, but the actual pronouncement would have taken her by surprise if not for her mysterious benefactor's warning.

Calixte didn't like mysteries, unless they were of her own design. She didn't like being led. With everything else going on it was hard to direct her covert resources to finding the identity of her supposed ally, but it was something she'd have to do.

She removed her robe and gathered her clothes. As she put them on she lingered before the window and caught the pale lines of her reflection against a patch of shadow. The faintness of her image seemed to erase time; the lines on her face and bags under her eyes. For a moment it was like she was looking at Morrigan Corde; the woman she'd been born as, the woman she'd quietly killed to become Nyna Calixte.

She had the power to shape history now, something Morrigan couldn't have dreamed of. There was no reason to miss that woman. Still, sentiment tugged at her.

She had better things to do than get mawkish. Calixte turned away from the image, finished putting on her clothes, and hurried out of Veed's apartment.

"We'd be foolish to look at this as anything other than an opportunity," Morlish Veed said. "We have- all of us- long sought to promote the Empire as a political leader for the whole galaxy. Now we have that opportunity. Seventy-eight afflicted planets cry out for justice and countless more cry for leadership- leadership the Alliance is utterly failing to provide. It is not only right but *necessary* that the Empire do what needs to be done."

He walked a slow circle around the High Moff Council's chambers as he made his plea. Watching in silence, Roan Fel thought it unusually theatric for the admiral. Veed continued, "If we offer our help to the seventy-eight worlds, if we give them the *justice* they deserve, we will enhance the Empire's prestige and territory both. Moff Fehlaaur, you've just said that those worlds would be willing to secede from the Alliance and enter a pact with the Empire to secure justice. Think of that, gentlemen. In a day, we can add seventy-eight worlds to our territory."

"Seventy-eight *ruined* worlds," the Chiss pointed out.

“Many healthy ones will follow when they see the Empire’s providing *real* leadership,” Moff Geist said.

Veed and Geist were the Council’s biggest hawks, but Roan didn’t get the impression they’d collaborated on a plan for this meeting. The army chief’s interjection seemed to have knocked Veed off his rhetorical rails and he sputtered for a few seconds before remembering what he was going to say next. “The point is simple. We have an historic opportunity. We can seize it and enhance the Empire, or we can sit on our hands, let it pass, and sink into irrelevance even faster than the Alliance. Gentlemen, I see no choice here at all. We are the *Empire*. We have never been timid.” Veed tilted a head at Roan. “Were Jagged or Davek Fel timid when they did what they did? Of course not. We owe it to their legacies to be as bold as they.”

Roan let the painfully transparent appeal pass in silence. Veed circled back to his chair, placed both hands on its back, and concluded, “We must offer our appeal to seventy-eight worlds immediately. While the Alliance dithers, we will be strong. The entire galaxy needs to know that we will not rest until justice is done.”

Veed took his seat with finality, but the debate was far from over. Standing arms-crossed at the edge of table, Roan said, “That was very eloquent, Moff Veed. However, for all the moral clarity in your speech, reality is far more complicated. The Alliance dithers because it is honestly trying to figure out who is responsible for the ruining of those worlds. They sent investigators to Ossus and Zonama Sekot two weeks ago and *still* haven’t found proof the Jedi *or* the Vong shapers were responsible.”

“Zonama Sekot fled deeper into the Unknown Regions,” intelligence director Seniac pointed out. “That hardly seems the actions of an innocent party. I’ve heard it was one of the reasons the seventy-eight worlds invoked Anaxes.”

“Zonama Sekot disappeared only after the Alliance investigators left,” Imperial Mission director Konrad Rus pointed out.

“It still says they had something to hide,” Geist said. “And of course the Alliance people aren’t going to find proof.”

They were surrounded by Jedi on Ossus and Zonama Sekot. You can be sure those cultists were using their Force-powers to influence with the investigator's minds."

Roan shot Geist a firm stare. "I hope you're not suggesting *all* Force-users use their powers to such ends."

"Of course not, Your Majesty. But we all know the Jedi cult bows to no other power. They think their Force gives them divine right to meddle in the affairs of lesser beings." His eyes locked firmly on Roan's. "Your father knew that. Isn't that why he created the Imperial Knights- to be loyal to the *Empire* and to his authority?"

Roan had gotten indignant and walked into a rhetorical trap when he should have seen it. Coolly he said, "Imperial Knights *do* serve the Force. They also serve their Emperor, so long as he embodies its light side." It was distinction secular minds like these moffs' would never grasp, but he hoped to remind them that his Knights obeyed the Emperor alone, and not their Council.

Roan moved his attention to the man who'd been silent until now. Admiral Kaylac, Supreme Commander of all the Empire's armed forces, cleared his throat and said, "The questions of who's to blame for these attacks may be academic. We may simple never know. We should turn our attention to more practical concerns."

"Which concerns?" asked Fehlaaur.

"Admiral Veed speaks of doling out justice," Kaylac said. "An admirable goal, to be sure, but *how* can justice be dealt out? We don't have the technology to undo the Vongforming damage. If we knew the specific perpetrators, we could bring the might of the military down on them."

"The perpetrators are obvious," Geist said. "Only the Vong had the knowledge to ruin those planets."

"Yes, but which Vong?" asked Felhaur. "It may have been a rogue faction of shapers."

"Does it matter?" Veed gave the table a stern look-around. "We're in this situation, ultimately, because a hundred years ago the Jedi decided to give the Vong a second chance instead of the harsh justice they deserved. This isn't just about justice for the hundred worlds- it's for the four

hundred trillion people who were murdered by their initial invasion, and whose justice was denied by the Jedi.”

“That’s a grand rhetorical statement,” Roan said, and again atypical for Veed. “Admiral Kaylac’s point stands true. What do you suggest we do, practically speaking, to achieve justice for the seventy-eight worlds that invoked Anaxes?”

“We make sure the Vong can never hurt *any* of our worlds again,” said Geist. “We find Zonama Sekot. We interdict it, capture it, and place it under military occupation. Anyone that stands in our way- a Vong navy, the Jedi, even the Alliance- needs to be deemed a threat to galactic safety and treated as an enemy.”

“Capture a living planet, that can jump to hyperspace at will?” asked Rus. “That seems... a tall order.”

“The Empire meets challenges. It doesn’t hide from them,” Geist growled, then swung his gaze to Roan. “Veed is dead right, Your Majesty. Even if it was a rogue faction who did this, the whole Vong race has to be held accountable. And so do their Jedi protectors.”

“The Jedi may see it as their duty to defend the Vong to the end,” Fehlaaur said.

Roan knew they would. “I will not pitch my Knights in battle against the Jedi,” he said.

“Does that mean you’ll veto a resolution by this Council?” asked Veed.

“The Council has no control over my Knights. They do as *I* order, and no one else,” Roan said firmly.

“The Council still has power,” said Geist. “We can override your veto on other matters with a unanimous vote.”

Roan let his gaze drift across the table. He met blatant aggression from Geist, determination from Veed; Seniac and Fehlaaur looked thoughtful and ambivalent; Rus shirked from his gaze; Kaylac gave nothing.

“Again,” Roan said, “Let us vote practically. The Empire has not gone to war in a generation. We all remember what it cost us last time. Are we ready to commit ourselves to another war, against an uncertain enemy, who- as yet- has presented us no clear threat whatsoever?”

"If justice demands it," Veed said. The mantle of righteousness didn't fit him, and Roan wondered whether someone had placed it on his shoulders.

Kaylac shook his head. "I see no reason to seek out a war with the Vong. We have no proof they're any kind of threat to the Empire."

Director Seniac said, "That may no longer be true."

All eyes turned to him in surprise, including Roan's. "What does that mean?" the emperor asked.

"Reliable intelligence has recently become available," Seniac said. "I'm sorry, Majesty, but there wasn't time to brief you beforehand."

The intel chief was normally one of Roan's most reliable men. He chose- for now- to believe him. "What have you learned?"

"Our listening posts in the Unknown Regions have picked up signs of large unidentified fleets on the move, many close to the border with our space. Initially they were mistaken for fast-moving asteroid fields, which is a common mistake when first encountering Vong warships."

"You're saying the rogue Vong have a whole *fleet* built up?" Geist asked. Roan sensed genuine surprise from him in the Force.

"I don't think these are indications we can ignore," said Seniac.

"The Chiss Ascendancy has told me none of this," Felhaur said. "I'd very much like to see those reports."

"You all will, I promise." Seniac looked to Roan. "I can present them now, if you'd like."

Roan didn't like being blindsided. He felt no ill intent from his intel chief in the Force; the man seemed honestly concerned about a security threat. So, he felt, did Kaylac and Rus, and they were the swing votes Geist and Veed would need.

That the Chiss hasn't heard about this was surprising, but threats from the Unknown Regions had to be taken seriously. Thirty-five years ago, savage alien raiders had killed Roan's grandfather and nearly brought the Empire to its knees.

"Alright, Director Seniac," Roan said. "You may begin."

Quiet dread settled in his stomach as he watched Seniac's report. He detailed a dozen different reports, some from Imperial intel teams in the Unknown Regions and some from independent clients. They all pointed to a build-up of what could only have been Vong ships. The numbers were still extremely vague, but their motion matched that of a fleet preparing for an invasion on Alliance space.

It shocked Roan; even with panic spreading across the galaxy and rumors of a second great Vong invasion, he'd never thought their race was anything but a tamed and crippled shadow of its old self. If there really were other colonies of the rogue Vong in the Unknown Regions, they could have grown new warships in secret.

Still, his instinct was to doubt. "This is very interesting information, Director Seniac, but none of it is confirmed," he said. "We need to investigate more thoroughly- to find *proof* of a new Vong fleet and its intentions- before we act."

"There's no time for that," Veed insisted. "The Empire has to take swift, decisive action. The Alliance can dither but we can't."

"And if this new Vong fleet is a mirage, or bad intelligence?" asked Felhaur.

"Then our war for justice will be so much easier," said Veed.

"It won't just be for justice. It will be a defensive war," said Rus. Strangely, Roan caught a sense of relief from him.

"Only if these reports are true," he said. "We have no positive verification."

"That may take weeks. We may only get it with a second wave of Vong attacks," Veed said. "We must vote and press ahead *now*."

Seniac's intel had jarred the other moffs from their positions; Roan could feel them tipping toward Veed's side. He hadn't expected it to go this way, and he told them, "I will not commit the Empire to a war with unclear objectives and no victory conditions."

"Does that mean you will veto a decision by this council?" Geist asked daringly.

Roan nodded. "I am Emperor. I have that power and I will execute it."

Kaylac sighed and said, "We aren't committing ourselves to a major war just yet. We're voting on whether to respond to the seventy-eight worlds."

Veed jumped at his words. "Exactly. We're voting on whether to recognize their invocation of the Anaxes Treaty. We're voting on whether to see justice done, or step aside."

"I recommend we vote now," said Geist.

"Seconded," snapped Veed.

It took one more to call for a vote. To Roan surprise, Konrad Rus raised a hand. "I would like to vote as well."

Rus was normally one of Roan's most reliable allies. He felt the situation slipping past his control and tried to calm himself; Felhaur would want to consult with the Chiss Ascendancy before voting. That would buy him time.

"I vote to recognize the seventy-eight worlds," Veed began.

"As do I," said Geist.

Seniac sighed deeply and said, "I also vote in favor."

"As do I," said Rus, meekly.

Eyes turned to the Chiss. Felhaur frowned and said, "This vote should never have been forced. A decision this important should never be made hastily. However... in light of the new evidence from Director Seniac... I vote in favor."

And finally, everyone looked at Kaylac. The supreme commander did not meet Roan's eyes, and he knew that he was lost. "We cannot ignore threats to the security of the Empire. What happens in the Alliance affects us inevitably. I vote in favor."

Veed turned to his emperor with a smile so tight and smug it took all Roan's training as a Knight not to Force-throttle him. "There you have it, Majesty. The vote is unanimous."

"So it is." Roan's hands clenched into fists. "You have committed the Empire to a dangerous course, and there can be no predicting the consequences. I only hope you don't regret your decision."

"I'm proud of what we've done today," said Veed. "Be calm, Majesty. This will strengthen the Empire's political

and moral authority galaxy-wide, and what's good for your Empire is good for us all."

In all his years as an Imperial Knight, Eshkar Niin had never seen his emperor truly angry. After meeting the Moff Council, Roan Fel had retreated to his chambers. Niin, the empress, and Fel's cousin Mohrgan Valtor had gathered in the room with him and stood awkwardly at its edges as he paced furiously in its center.

"This was not a coincidence. Not for something as important as this. I was outflanked, purposely and deliberately." Fel spat every word through snarled lips. "Now they've cast the Empire on a path that could lead us to ruin."

"Outflanked by whom?" Niin asked. "Seniac?"

"I don't know. I've always trusted his judgement, but to be sprung with that kind of intel- that unverified intel- in the middle of a key meeting... That was unlike him."

"Veed was the one who pressed for a vote," Mohrgan pointed out. No one had to say that Veed was ambitious, or that he'd do anything in his power to press the Empire into a war so long as Veed thought he could win it.

Fel scowled. "Veed is not a subtle man. Normally I can see his maneuvers from kilometers away. He seemed surprised by Seniac's intel, though he could have faked it."

"You didn't sense deception from any of them?" asked Elliah.

Fel shook his head. "Nothing explicit."

The empress sighed. "I'm surprised Kaylac voted for war, but Rus is especially remarkable. For a moff, he was always so..."

She trailed off. Niin supplied, "Timid," and she nodded.

"We're not actually in a war." Mohrgan appealed for calm.

"Yet," the emperor said, and spun on his wife. "No matter what the military elects to do, the Imperial Knights will *not* take up arms against our Jedi cousins. As Empress and First Knight, you have to make sure they know that."

"I will," she nodded firmly.

"And you, Master Niin." Fel turned to the Iktotchi. Niin felt his emperor's stern gaze and straightened. "I have a

different task for you. You've always been good at strategy; developing careful plans of action and discerning those of others."

"Thank you, Majesty." For a moment Niin thought Fel might task him with developing a battle plan, just in case Jedi and Imperial Knights really did come to blows. It would be a tragedy, but a part of Niin would relish the challenge.

"I believe what happened today happened on purpose. Rus's vote was too inexplicable. Seniac's timing was too perfect. I don't know if it was Veed or Geist or someone else who forced our hand, but it was clearly *someone*. I want you to do everything possible to find out who."

Niin blinked. "I'm to be your covert investigator, then?"

"Exactly. This is very important. It could determine the fate of the Empire."

That, too, was a challenge. Niin felt inflated by his emperor's trust. "I will do as you command, Majesty. What of my apprentice?"

"Draco is a brave young man. He'll join your investigation. Hopefully you can teach him to be clever as well as fearless."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Fel exhaled. His anger had retreated without going away. His eyes were dark as he turned on Mohrgan. "Even though I do not approve, the Empire has elected to support the seventy-eight worlds crying for revenge. We can't afford a disunited front, which means I'll be joining Veed and Kaylac on a trip to meet our new allies. Cousin, we have to prepare security arrangements. They'll be tighter than ever. No one except a Knight is to be trusted."

"I understand, Majesty."

"Then come with me. We have more to discuss." With a wave of the hand and the flare of his cape, Fel marched through the door beyond into his personal office. Mohrgan followed him through but Elliah did not, and when the door closed she and Niin were left alone.

"These are unwelcome events," she sighed.

"Perhaps," Niin said evenly.

Elliah eyed him. "You're smarter than to fall for Veed's talk, Eshkar."

"Someone should stand for justice. If the Alliance doesn't, why shouldn't the Empire?"

"It's more complicated than that. We may never know who sabotaged those worlds."

"That doesn't negate the crime, or the need for punishment."

Elliah shook her head. "Punishment isn't just if the wrong person is punished. It's cruelty."

"Cruelty is letting a hundred worlds get destroyed twice-over." Niin frowned. "Do you believe the Jedi when they say the Yuuzhan Vong have reformed?"

"I've never been to Zonama Sekot. I don't know." Elliah shrugged awkwardly. "My husband does. I have to believe he's right."

Niin was less certain. The Yuuzhan Vong had wrought untold horrors a hundred years ago. The Jedi preached about the redeeming power of the light side of the Force, and Niin believed in that power, but the Vong were not *of* the Force. He struggled to see how a culture could change so much in just a century.

But that was not his task. He drew breath and said, "Whatever the Vong have done, we know *someone* is trying to push the Empire toward a war."

"Successfully," the empress added.

"Yes. And my job is to find out who. The rest is for someone else to accomplish."

"It's good you've accepted your role, Eshkar." She smiled weakly. "Just be careful. They may be one in the same."

"Does the Force tell you that?"

"No. The Force tells me nothing about what's going on. I don't like this." She hugged herself as though chilled. He felt the urge to comfort her and knew he could not. "Just be careful, Eshkar. The Empire can't afford to lose one of its best Knights."

After the successful vote in the Moff Council, Veed insisted on celebratory dinner. This time Calixte hardly

minded; the success of their ploy left her almost light-headed. Before joining him, however, there was a much more important conversation to have.

Calixte activated the transceiver in her personal quarters and typed in the encryption code recorded only in her head. She waited almost two full minutes, and then it appeared: that bland male face, staring back at her with dead eyes.

"It was a success," she told her contact. "The Moff Council voted unanimously to support the seventy-eight worlds. An official statement will be forthcoming."

"Excellent." Just a bit of inflection leaked into the voice. "You've done very well, Moff Calixte."

It sounded vaguely like an owner congratulating its pet. Calixte said, "I'm glad our *partnership* is yielding desired results. However, we still have no idea how the Alliance will respond."

"They will back the Jedi," her contact said, matter-of-fact.

She felt a chill down her spine. Since leaving Kol she'd climbed the ladder of rank as quickly as possible, using every opportunity to obtain her goals. Every lofty ambition could be attained through a combination of ruthlessness, patience, and attention to detail. She'd believed that, held to it, and prided herself in her accomplishments.

She realized, for the first time, that her own machinations might be small in comparison to what her contact was working toward.

"How has Emperor Fel reacted to the vote?" the bland voice asked.

"I've not spoken with him personally. I understand he's angry, but he hasn't tried to block the resolution. He'll be meeting representatives from the seventy-eight worlds soon."

"Do you know where?"

"I do not," she admitted. She'd considered from the start that her contact would have designs, possibly lethal, against Roan Fel. She wasn't against removing him, in theory, but she needed to make sure she'd benefit from it. "I can, however, find out. If you wish."

After blank-faced paused, her contact said, "That will not be necessary. However, it would be in our best interest if the

seventy-eight worlds were fast-tracked for admission to the Empire.”

For once, Calixte felt confident that *our* referred to both her and the mysterious benefactor. “I believe that is already the plan.”

“It would be best if you were there, personally, to ensure it.”

She’d considered that already. Veed was already set to join Fel on that trip, as was Supreme Commander Kaylac. To her knowledge, Intel director Seniac was not, and if she asked she could probably join the delegation on his behalf. She’d hesitated, mostly because of Veed. They’d refrained from being seen publicly except in official capacities and did their best to avoid appearing together before Roan Fel. They could never be certain how much he’d glean with the Force.

“I believe that could be arranged,” she said. “However, there are heightened risks.”

“Such as?”

“The Emperor’s Jedi powers are an unpredictable variable.”

The blank face paused again while her contact thought. Then it said, “You should attend the meeting. The rewards are greater than the risks.”

She didn’t like evasion. “I already said those planets will get fast-tracked into the Empire. What’s so important that only I can do it?”

“You should speak with some of the representatives privately. Without Fel’s knowledge.”

“And we’ll talk about what?”

“The seventy-eight worlds combined have an impressive collection of warships.”

So her contact wanted to start a war. She knew that; she’d seen it coming. Still, it felt different being on the edge of the precipice. “They’re a collection of miss-matched militias. Nothing an Alliance battle group couldn’t handle.”

“With Imperial backing they’ll be more formidable.”

“So I should encourage them to launch an attack, and Fel’s fleets will have no choice but to aid their new allies.” She crossed her arms. “Not a bad plan. Do you suggest a target?”

"There can only be one," the dead voice said. "Ossus."

She felt vertigo, like she was staring down a long, dark fall. Ossus was, of course, the obvious choice. Her mouth went dry. "Do you wish to destroy the Jedi?"

"The Alliance will be forced to act. And then we'll have our war."

Calixte knew that *our* was again referring to them both. It was her war as much as her ally's. Through a war with a disjointed, confused Alliance, the Empire could expand territory and prestige to height not known since Palpatine. She could rise right alongside Veed; he'd spoken openly about replacing Kaylac and she could easily see herself in Seniac's role. Together, commanding the military and the security apparatus, they'd be the two most powerful beings in the Empire besides its monarch.

The offer was tempting beyond all words. One image stood between her and that desire: Kol Skywalker, bleeding and battered after his flight from Wayland, standing beside a twelve-year-old boy with messy blonde hair and a shock-blank face.

She'd sacrificed a lot to get where she was now, including hapless people unlucky enough to be useful to her. Morrigan Corde had been the first one discarded. But Kol and Cade were something else; a line she couldn't cross, maybe her last one.

But then, an attack on Ossus did not mean the destruction of the Jedi. As her contact had said, the desire was to spark a clash between the Empire and Alliance. The battle didn't even have to reach the planet surface.

Kol and his Jedi could be properly warned, well before the vengeful fleet showed up. They'd prepare, they'd defend. They'd survive. She'd make sure of that.

And she'd keep it to herself. Veed and her client would never know.

"I believe all that can be arranged," she said at last. "We'll have our spark, and then our fire."

"Excellent. We knew you would understand."

There was one thing left to say; one question to ask. It was dangerous, maybe lethally so, but if there was a time to ask,

it was now. She'd made herself too essential for them to dispose of her.

"Now that our plans are nearing fruition," Calixte said, "I'm making one small request."

"Go ahead."

"We've walked a long way together. If we're going to walk further, I want to know who you really are. I want to see your *real* face."

The fake one stared at her with dead eyes. It didn't even blink. After a drawn-out minute her contact said, "That is acceptable. But not yet."

"When?"

"After the battle at Ossus."

"After Ossus you might no longer need me," she said bluntly.

"We will need you more than ever. We want someone we trust directing Imperial Intelligence. Seniac is not the one."

They could have been lying to her, leading her on, stalling for time. "I need a better reason to wait. Who are you, and what are your designs for the Empire?"

"Our designs for the Empire are to restore it to greatness."

Somehow she'd expected more than unreconstructed Palpatine-lovers. "My father was one of those. It cost him his life."

"You do not understand. We don't just want the Empire to rise. We want the Alliance to fall."

"The Alliance has three times our territory and resources."

"The Alliance is already crumbling. Seventy-eight worlds are about to secede and join the Empire. More will follow and even more will sit on the sidelines of a war and leap to join whoever wins. We offer you a place of leadership in an Empire that spans the galaxy once again. Will you turn that down, Nyna Calixte?"

Something in that dead voice sounded absolutely assured, and she was chilled again. "You didn't answer my first question. Who *are* you?"

"All will be revealed after Ossus. You have our word."

The connection died suddenly. Calixte felt the urge to hail them again, but she knew there'd be no response.

She didn't take their word for much, but it was all she had. She stood at the precipice's edge and saw no other choice but to jump. She would have to hold secret meetings with the newly-pledged Imperials, then warn the Jedi before they attacked Ossus.

Her entire life since leaving Kol and Cade had been a succession of schemes and gambles, each ascension precipitated by a bold risk. The risks had never been greater, not the ascension. She took a deep breath and felt overwhelmed with the feeling that everything in her lives-Morrigan Corde's *and* Nyna Calixte's- had been building to this moment.

With all her lives behind her, there was nothing to do but jump, and try to land as best she could.

Chapter Seven

It was Jade Skywalker's wish that she could be there for her son, but Kol had insisted that he face the Alliance senate alone. Therefore she remained on Ossus and watched the holo-broadcast along with a congregation of other Jedi.

He was at the central rostrum, the grand arena spread out all around and the triumvirs seated at the table behind him. He'd come to give a speech pleading for the backing of the Alliance, then answer hard questions. Instead he stood before a bedlam. His appearance began almost an hour behind schedule, and the reporter on the news broadcast had spent most of the lag time explaining all the causes for delay. Most of the seventy-eight worlds that had just made their pact with the Empire had withdrawn their representatives, leaving empty seats behind, but a few delegates had stayed to raise noisy protests. Senators from over two hundred planets, still seated with the Alliance, either joined the protests or withdrew their people in a show of disdain for the Jedi. In addition, over two hundred thousand protesters were estimated to have gathered outside the senate hall and security was constantly combing the building in response to the hundred-plus bomb threats received in the past twenty-four hours alone.

When Kol finally did start speaking he was greeted by a chorus of jeers from hundreds of senators, which were in turn met by standing accolades from hundreds more. He stayed at his podium, silenced but steadfast, and waited almost five minutes for the hall to quiet down. In that time, a

large faction of senators staged a walkout. The broadcast's commentator said that, with all these abstentions, the Senate still held a quorum required to pass a binding vote- but just barely.

"This might actually work in our favor," Nat said from the seat beside his mother. "If the anti-Jedi votes walk, the ones that stay can rule in our favor, with a majority."

With a roar, Lowbacca pointed out that the worlds which had walked away would refuse to accept the vote as legitimate. There was no way this meeting could end with the Alliance's credibility unscathed. Meanwhile, just the day before, Roan Fel had held a highly-publicized meeting with representatives from seventy-eight worlds that wished to secede from the Alliance and join the Empire.

"I've never seen this kind of political dysfunction before," Nat said gravely. "I never thought *we'd* be at the center of it."

Jade looked to K'Kruhk. The massive, ancient Whiphid was watching the broadcast with narrowed eyes and emotions closed off from the Force. Softly Jade asked him, "Does this remind you of the fall of the Old Republic?"

K'Kruhk shook his shaggy head. "No. In the Clone Wars, there was no discord in the Senate. Everyone fell under Palpatine's sway and it was terrifying."

Lowbacca moaned that it reminded him of the collapse of the New Republic during the first Yuuzhan Vong War.

"The *first* Yuuzhan Vong war," Nat echoed. "Are we already resigned to a second?"

"There's been peace between Bastion and Coruscant for over a century," Jade whispered. "I can't believe it will end now, like this..."

"Every peace ends," K'Kruhk said with knowing finality.

Lowbacca's son Karrashchakuk, sitting closest to the holoprojector, let out a roar to let everyone know the senate session had finally started. The Jedi hunched in silent attention and watched as Kol began his speech. He was still interrupted with bursts of boos, applause, or both simultaneously, but he plodded onward, describing the genesis of the Ossus Project and stressing the role the

Alliance senate had had in approving it. He reiterated the lofty hopes for union and redemption that had driven the project, then stressed, repeatedly and in detail, the fact that Alliance investigators had found no sign of wrongdoing by any of the Yuuzhan Vong shapers or Jedi involved in the Ossus project.

Just when he was moving to wrap-up, a new voice boomed: "If the Vong are innocent, why did they flee into the Unknown Regions?"

The news-net's holo-cam swung around until it spotted the red-faced senator and marked him as the representative from the Atravis Sector. Then it swung back to Kol, who said patiently, "It was purely a matter of safety. Extremists have reached Zonama Sekot in the past and endangered it. We removed the chance it might happen again."

"And you removed any incriminating evidence!"

Seated behind Kol, Triumvir Gahan banged his gavel. "I'd remind the senator from Atravis that there is time for questions allotted *after* Master Skywalker's speech."

"It needs answering *now*!" another senator called.

"An answer was just provided. Master Skywalker, please continue your speech."

With admirable aplomb Kol continued, and this time Gahan muted any senator who attempted to interrupt. As he brought his speech to a close he said, "We understand your desire for justice. We share it absolutely. The Ossus Project should have been a chance for all our peoples to start again and heal wounds a century old. Instead it has become a nightmare perversion of everything we sought. The Jedi and our Yuuzhan Vong friends are enraged by this betrayal, and we are doing everything in our power to find the ones responsible.

"I know you are angry, and I know you want revenge now. But I plead with you, give us *time*. Working together the Alliance, Jedi, and Yuuzhan Vong can find the truth behind this catastrophe. Then, *together*, we will find justice. To act in haste and anger will bring no justice, only harm."

Jade was surprised by the ovation that got him. Many senators quickly rose to drown the cheering out with jeers,

and it was another five minutes before Triumvir Gahan banged his gavel and announced that the question session had begun.

What followed was more of shouting match than an inquiry. Kol held his ground admirably, raising his voice only to be heard, while arguing senators interrogated each other more than the Jedi. Weariness grew plain on the faces of the three triumvirs, and finally Gahan closed the inquiry with more banging of his gavel and announced that time had come for a vote.

Kol stepped off the stage and joined the triumvirs at their table. The vote was as raucous an affair as everything else today. Many senators who'd sat through Kol's session only announced their boycott at the start of the vote. Another group stormed theatrically out of the senate chamber, while the frantic news reporter relayed that, even with this last walkout, the senate just barely held a quorum.

"No one's going to take this seriously," scowled Nat as actual votes started rolling in.

"It is legally binding," said K'Kruhk.

"Laws are only laws if people follow them. This..."

Nat waved a hand at the broadcast. The vote counter at the bottom of the holo ticked every few seconds. As the Jedi watched, it became clear that the number of votes in favor of Kol's proposal- and against recognizing the Anaxes Treaty as the seventy-eight worlds had requested- were taking a clear lead. It was impossible to feel cheered by this; had the senate hall been full, Jade knew they couldn't have won. This vote would pit Alliance and Empire on opposite sides of an incredibly combustible issue, and whatever Roan Fel said in private, his public face was that of a unified empire's strong leader. Strength and unity for the Alliance were long gone.

When the final tally was officially announced, with votes nearly two-thirds against recognizing the treaty, the hall was once more drowned out in applause and angry shouts. The view from the holo-camera swung close on the podium in the center where Jade's son sat with the three triumvirs. Nu Toreena's hammerheaded face was hard for Jade to read, but

Gial Gahan's wide mouth was drooped into a frown and his bulbous eyes looked glassy. Bail Antilles ran a hand through hair, fingers clenched. And Jade's son, who'd spent his whole life trying to realize a dream where Jedi, Yuuzhan Vong, and Alliance peoples were gathered as one, kept his face inscrutably blank. Only a mother could see the deep sorrow in his shadowed eyes. It ached Jade to be far away and unable to help him, but she knew that were she right beside him there was still nothing she could do for her son, and that was the worst thing of all.

It was the sight of Kol Skywalker sitting stoic at the senate podium that decided her. After denying it for weeks, trying to go about her business and pretending the galaxy wasn't falling apart around her, Marin Solo finally admitted that something had to be done.

As *Fast Start* plied the Perlemian coreward through the Expansion Region, Marin arranged for Benet to keep Ania busy in the auxiliary loading bay, ensconced herself in her office, and patched in a private and encrypted call to her father. It had been months since they'd last spoken, and far longer since she'd seen him in person. When his face appeared on the holo-image above her desk she was struck by the pure white of his beard and hair, even though she'd seen it before; somehow he was always younger in her mind's eye.

"Hi, Dad." She gave him a weak smile. "Long time no talk."

"It's good to hear from you," Arlen said. Understandable, there was little joy in his voice. "How are Benet and Ania?"

"They're holding up. Ania's hit that age where she'd old enough to listen to the news and know everything's gone to *osik*, but not old enough to really grasp it all. So we're trying to keep her mind busy with other things."

Arlen nodded soberly. "And your husband?"

"He's been pressuring me to get in contact with you for weeks. Honestly, Dad... it's not that I don't want to help. Really. I'm just not sure what I can *do*. But I wanted to check in, at least."

"I understand. Thank you. And I actually did have something in mind."

"Well. It's a good thing I called." Marin wondered if her father might have gotten some premonition, if the Force might still be working through her even after she'd declared herself rid of it. She didn't know how she'd feel about that.

"You know the Jedi are in dire straits now, and there's no telling what might happen next. We don't have many friends we can rely on, so we have to use the ones we've got. Marin, I need you to go to Denon and talk to Chance Calrissian."

That was someone Marin had thought she'd never see again. Chance was her father's oldest friend and co-owner of an interstellar industrial conglomerate that had its hands in everything from droid manufacturing to durasteel smelting. Chance was pushing ninety now and, best Marin knew, had handed over day-to-day operations to his daughter Chereth and his long-time partner, a mostly-legitimate Hutt named Volgma.

"If you give me their exact coordinates, I'll stop by. What am I going for exactly?"

"I'll send you the coordinates and more. Specifically, information on eleven credit accounts held at banks on Brentaal, Ralltiir, Coruscant, and Corellia. Tell Chance and Chereth we need their help in moving all funds into new accounts where they'll appreciate in secret."

Marin's face screwed up. "So this is about protecting the Jedi Order's finances?"

"Sometimes credits are as essential as the Force," Arlen said wryly. "Corulag, Commenor, and a half-dozen other planets just seized accounts affiliated with the Jedi, including ones where ownership was supposedly confidential."

"That's why you want *me* to go."

"Exactly. People know the Calrissians are friendly with the Order. If a known Jedi met with them- and the contents of that meeting got out- it could be bad for them and us."

"But if they meet with someone from Solo Shipping Incorporated, it'll be no big deal."

"Exactly. Marin, this money is important."

She had to smirk at that. Three decades and a lifetime ago, credits had been the furthest thing from her mind. Only after striking out on her own and starting a business with Benet did she realize that the larger galaxy depended on credits like Jedi depended on the Force. "I understand, Dad. I'll make sure the Jedi's assets are protected."

"Good. And once the Calrissians set up the new accounts, I want you to have executive access to all of them."

The thought of suddenly being a trillionaire made Marin's head ache. "I'm not used to handling that kind of cash, Dad."

"I know. You'll be co-owners of the accounts along with the Calrissians."

"Okay." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Do the Jedi have plans for this money, aside from scurrying it away before it's taken from them?"

"Possibly."

Marin raised a brow.

"Contact me again once you've set everything up. We should have more figured out by then." Arlen added, "Give Chance my best, too."

"Of course, Dad. Is there anything else?"

"Maybe. Any chance I'll get to see my grandkid one of these days?"

He asked it with a grin, but she could tell he was serious. Marin hesitated; she'd gone to great lengths to separate her new life from her old one, and while she wasn't opposed to Arlen meeting Ania on principle, it would completely change her relationship with her daughter if Ania found out her mother had been a Jedi.

Arlen saw her balk and smiled, generously, regretfully. "Just something to think about. I'll send you all the account info after I log off. May the Force be with you, Marin."

"You too," she said, relieved.

The holo shut off. She stared at the blank bulkhead while her comm system downloaded the account data, wondering if the Force really could still be with her after she'd shoved it away.

When the download was complete, Marin went down four decks to *Fast Start's* secondary cargo bay. The cavernous

space contained not just crates of cargo they were hauling inbound from the Tion Cluster, but the stout, narrow-winged body of the shuttle *Runaround*. They used the hyperdrive-capable ship for occasional courier trips, and while it wasn't exactly spacious it was still a vast improvement over the ancient X-wing fighter Marin had flown about during her Jedi days.

Benet, Ania, and one of the astromech droids were going over cargo when they saw Marin approaching. She did her best to smile and gave Ania a squeeze on the shoulder.

"How's it coming along?" she asked her daughter.

"Almost done, Mom. EB-12 and I retagged all eighteen crates." Ania added, "Dad helped a little."

"Well, I'm glad he's making himself useful." She kept the smile but put gravity into her voice as she told Benet, "When we unload at Ralltiir, I'm going to take *Runaround* and swing by Denon."

"Can I come?" Ania bleated. Whenever they reached a planet the girl always wanted to get out and see as much as she could. Small wonder, given that she spent most of her time cooped up on a travelling cargo hauler.

"No, you've got to stay and make sure your dad doesn't screw anything up." She gave Benet a pat on the back.

"How long will you be gone?" he asked.

"I don't plan to spend more than a day on Denon. Just hold at Ralltiir until I get back. That shouldn't throw us off schedule."

"All right."

Marin didn't need the Force to know her husband wanted to talk about this more, but not in front of Ania. Marin looked back to her daughter and said, "Why don't you and EB-12 start running preflight checks on *Runaround*? You know how to do that, don't you?"

"Um, I think so." Ania got the skeptical look that said she knew some grown-up conversation was about to happen. The droid, however, gave an affirmative toot and promptly rolled off toward the shuttle. Ania followed.

Once their daughter was out of earshot, Benet asked, "Well? What did your father say?"

"He just wants me to do one thing for him on Denon. Like I said, it shouldn't be a problem."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"You're the one who's encouraged me to get involved."

"I know. I just want to know what's going on." He glanced at Ania as she followed her droid up into the shuttle. "I want to make sure you won't be in danger."

"I'm not." She cupped his face, stroked his cheek. "Trust me. I'm just doing a little legitimate money transfer with one of my dad's friends. Something the Jedi want done quietly."

"Just stay safe."

"Don't worry about me."

She leaned in and kissed his other cheek. It would be strange seeing the Calrissians and Volgma after so long, but once it was over, it would be over. So she hoped. She had no expectation of this brief callback drawing her deeper into her past and no desire to be drawn. The life she'd built on *Fast Start* with Benet and Ania was simple an unglamorous and free of the crushing weight of larger responsibility, which was all she wanted now.

"I'll be back soon," Marin said. "I guarantee it."

On the outbound ride from Coruscant, Kol Skywalker had been hounded by too many unwelcome thoughts. All of them disappeared the second his shuttle registered an incoming transmission from an unknown source, utilizing a one-of-a-kind encryption key the comm system failed to recognize.

Kol, however, knew it instantly. The code had been used by him and one other during their time working together as covert agents. They were the only two beings in the galaxy who knew it, and even after all these years, Kol perfectly remembered the responding decryption key.

After entering it, the lonely cockpit lit up with the glowing image of a woman with her long black hair in a severe bun and the collar of an Imperial moff around her neck. Kol still wasn't used to seeing her like this; in his deepest private heart, he still called her Morrigan Corde.

"This is a surprise," Kol said simply. He didn't want to use her name, either of them.

"Hello, Kol." There was no joy in her voice, but a tiny part of him was heartened to hear his first name on her lips. "Are you on your way back to Ossus?"

"That's correct."

"I saw your speech in front of the senate. I suppose you did as well as you could have."

"Thank you. I assume there's a reason for this call."

She gave a tiny nod. "I'm giving you a warning, Kol. Ossus isn't safe."

No place in the galaxy was safe for Jedi now. He held back a rebuttal. "Can you be more specific?"

"Militias from the seventy-eight worlds are banding together for an attack on Ossus. They plan to drag the Empire into their little war."

"Then stop them. Can't Roan Fel—"

"Roan Fel's hands are tied by the Moff Council, as is already clear," she said. From this distance he gained nothing in the Force, but he felt a twinge of certainty. She wasn't lying, exactly, but she wasn't telling the whole truth either.

"Do you know when this attack is coming?"

"Within the next week. Perhaps as soon as four days."

Kol's mind raced. The Alliance Senate—what was left of it—had voted against recognizing the Anaxes Treaty, and the triumvirate had assured him the Jedi would be allowed more time to exonerate themselves. However, they'd yet to promise military assistance if the Jedi came under threat. Arlen Fel was still on Coruscant, trying to wrench assurances from them, but Kol had hurried offworld because there were still problems to attend to on Ossus.

"Did you hear me, Kol?" she pressed. "Within four days, you need to be ready to defend yourselves."

"How many ships?"

She paused, considering not the tally but whether to tell it. Finally she said, "Perhaps fifty ships. Mostly corvettes, frigates, and the like. The Rodians have also scrounged up an old star destroyer, *Predator*-class. But if the Imperial fleet decides to join, there's no telling."

"And Roan Fel can't stay their hand?"

"Don't depend on him," she said simply.

Kol felt frustration and anger toward his cousin. He'd thought Roan Fel strong enough to restrain the Empire's worst impulses. "There doesn't seem to be anyone I *can* rely on, is there?"

He wanted, hoped, prayed she'd say he could rely on her. But of course she didn't. "I'm doing what I can for you, Kol. If you can't muster defenses for Ossus in four days' time, you should be ready to evacuate."

"To where? Rhen Var, Bestine, or any of the other worlds we have academies on? They'll chase us there, too."

"I gave you a warning. That's all I can do." Her holo-projected eyes avoided his. Then she asked, "How is Cade?"

"On Ossus."

"I knew that. Kol-"

"I will do everything to protect our son, Morrigan, even if you won't."

His voice was angry, and she flinched. "Please, Kol. Don't call me that."

"A part of you is still her. We wouldn't be talking otherwise."

Her eyes narrowed, adamant and angry. "She's *gone*, Kol."

"No." He tapped his chest. "A part of her is here. Always. It's in Cade too."

For a moment they stared at each other from across the stars: adamant, angry, desperate. Then she looked away and said, "Goodbye, Kol."

The holo winked out, leaving him alone once more.

Marin's cargo-hauling business had built a reasonably comfortable life for her family, but from the moment she stepped into the Volgma-Tendrando Limited building on Denon, she was reminded of the great yawning gap between independent entrepreneurs and captains of industry. After presenting her credentials and passing through two layers of security she was whisked via all-transparisteel lift to the highest level of the two-hundred-storey tower. When it stopped she had an impeccable view of rival corporation's skyscrapers spreading to all horizons, but it was hard to appreciate Denon's ecumenopolis while struggling with

nausea-inducing vertigo. Maybe that was point. If you were in the big money, you wanted to show off how high you'd come, figuratively and literally.

When the doors slid open she stepped into the meeting room. The circular chamber's walls were all transparent too, while a red and gold décor marked the floor and ceiling both. She took in the room's three inhabitants in an instant. Volgma the Hutt was long and massive even by his species standards. Chereth Calrissian was on her feet and dressed in a neat business suit and Chance was seated in a mobile hover-chair near the circular conference table. Volgma hadn't changed much since Marin last saw him, but she was struck by all the steel-gray curls on Chereth's head and the way Chance's hair and beard had gone fully white.

"Welcome to Denon, young lady," Chance waved her forward. "It's been a long time."

"I'm not so young anymore." Marin offered a hand.

Chance's trembled with age, but he squeezed it hard. "To me, you're the picture of youth. How's your father?"

"Trying his best to manage a whirlwind. He sends his regards."

"Well, send mine right back. Take a seat."

Chance angled his hoverchair to dock at the table while Volgma scooted his repulsorsled to its edge. Marin and Chereth took seats beside one another and Marin began outlining what her father wanted done. The two Calrissians nodded knowingly the whole way through. As Arlen had predicted, the careful shifting of fiscal assets was something they knew all about.

"We should be able to get all of this done within a day," Chereth said.

"And there's no way people will be able to trace these assets back to the Jedi?"

"Absolutely not. But you and I will have full access to them."

"Well, this money isn't for either of us, but that's good to know."

"If your goal is to build up Jedi assets, this is a start, but there's a better way," Volgma rumbled.

Marin eyed him. As Marin had learned a long time ago, back in her Jedi days, Volgma was mostly-legitimate, but he was still a Hutt. “Go on.”

“Put some of these funds into secure accounts, to be sure,” he waved a tiny arm, “but the rest of these assets should be put to use in stocks and securities.”

“That sounds like a good way to lose money. The galactic stock exchange is in turmoil right now, just like everything else.” Marin looked around the table for agreement, but she could see Chereth and Chance were busy in thought.

“Tendrandro-Volgma Limited has access to a wealth of information about the industries we’re involved in, including our competitor’s strengths and weaknesses,” Volgma went on. “With our careful management I believe we could increase the Jedi Order’s assets by, oh, at least fifty-percent this year.”

“Stocks in defense industries are skyrocketing,” Chereth said.

“There’s always money to be made in war,” Chance added dryly.

“Okay, hold on.” Marin held up both hands. “Using confidential business information to increase our assets sounds like it’s taking us from morally hazy territory to *legally* hazy.”

“Laws governing finance were drawn up as a joint pact between the Alliance and the Empire,” said Volgma. “They’re now on the brink of war with each other. Even if those laws stay technically binding, do you believe anyone will bother enforcing them? No. You can be sure other corporations will do even more questionable things to profit from this conflict. Our actions will be serving a good cause, beyond fattening our credit accounts.”

“Besides, you said the Jedi Order is in terrible danger.” Chereth’s gaze was hard, and Marin fought the urge to look away. “They’ll need this. We can do it quietly to avoid attracting attention.”

“We’ll have direct management of those accounts,” Chance added. “You have our word that we’ll do everything we can to help the Jedi.”

Marin swallowed. She realized, once the surprise wore down, that this didn't bother her, not really. Finance law was a hard thing to care about when placed against the lives of her father, Nat, and all the other Jedi.

"I'll check with my father, just to make sure, but I think he'll agree," she said. "And... thank you for your help. You have no idea how much this means."

"None of us do, yet," Volgma said. "Pray we never have to find out."

It had the feeling of a war council. Less than an hour after he returned to Ossus, Kol Skywalker assembled the group at a meeting room in the Temple's lower pyramid. Lowbacca and K'Kruhk sat together, two massive furry bulks, Tili Qua on their right and Master Shaper Nei Rin on their left, the only non-Jedi in the group. Kol was joined by his mother and brother, plus a shimmering life-sized holo displaying Arlen Fel, broadcast from Coruscant.

"It doesn't matter where I got the information from," Kol explained after warning them of the attack on Ossus. "It's reliable, but it's not going to tell us more, so we have to work with what we have."

Grimly, Lowbacca said that the Jedi had to decide whether or not to abandon Ossus. It would take at least three days to evacuate the Temple of all people and equipment.

"There has to be another way," Nat shook his head. "This is *Ossus*. It's been the seat of the Jedi Order for almost a century."

"I wish we could get a guarantee of defense from the Alliance," Arlen said. "I've been trying to drag anything out of the triumvirs, but it's not going well."

"Perhaps you should speak with Fleet Command directly," said Nei Rin.

Arlen shook his head. "If I go behind their backs it will wreck my relationship with all three triumvirs, even Gahan. I sense he's on our side, for now. Bail Antilles is just trying to think of a way out of this mess. Nu Toreena... I'm not sure. I can tell she resents the Jedi."

"Her world *was* ruined by the Yuuzhan Vong," Kol pointed out.

"Yes, but once the Imperials threw in with the seventy-eight, something changed. She sees the Empire's action as an affront and says she wants to get those secessionist worlds back. And maybe more, just to show the Imperials their place." Arlen sighed. "So we may have a warmongering Ithorian in our corner. Which I never thought I'd see."

Lowbacca roared that, at this point, they'd need all the help they could get.

"Very true," grunted K'Kruhk. "Master Fel, please tell the triumvirate about this threat."

"They'll want to know where the intel came from." Arlen looked to Kol.

Kol shook his head. "I'm sorry, that's not possible."

"Then it probably won't carry much weight. I'll do what I can with them, but no promises."

"To surrender the Jedi Temple would be to admit defeat," Tili Qua chirped. "I do not want that."

"Indeed," K'Kruhk said. "I know what happens when the Jedi are driven underground, hunted and harried. We cannot allow it to happen again."

The ancient Whiphid's words dropped the room into somber silence. That K'Kruhk had experienced Palpatine's Jedi Purge himself gave his every word special weight, and none moreso than when he directly recalled his experiences. Those times still haunted him, a century and a half on, and Lowbacca suspected the revered Master had always turned down leadership of the Jedi Council because he feared accidentally leading the Order back to those dark times.

Lowbacca had experienced dark times of his own. With a series of low moans and roars, he explained how, during the first Yuuzhan Vong War, the Jedi had lost their academy on Yavin 4 and scattered across the stars. The Yuuzhan Vong had offered rewards for any Jedi handed to them, and the Jedi had become victims of those they'd sworn to protect. He explained the 'great river' Luke Skywalker had created to move Jedi through hostile territory, and embraced cooperation with friendly Alliance politicians and admirals.

The Jedi had survived the war with only half their original number, but they'd still fared better than they had during Palpatine's purge.

The recollection did little to cheer anyone. Nat sighed and asked, "Do we really think we're heading for that? Another purge?"

"That depends on if we can really get the Alliance on our side," said Kol.

"We need a better defense than scattering and hiding, no offense," Nat told the two old masters. "At the very least we should have some kind of bolt-hole we can run to. A hidden temple."

"I've taken steps to protect our financial resources," Arlen said. "So if we need to build a hideout, at least we'll have assets."

"What about money to defend ourselves?" Kol's brows drew together.

"Are you talking about... mercenaries?" Nei Rin frowned.

Ordinarily the suggestion would have been unthinkable. Now it was met with thoughtful silence. Arlen said, "I *might* have an idea. But it's a long shot."

"We need to act fast," Kol said. "If we *must* evacuate the Temple- and I swear that is a last resort- it will still take us several days."

"We can begin preparations now," said Tili Qua. "Get the younglings ready to move."

"Agreed," grunted K'Kruhk.

"We need to start looking for a fallback location too." Kol looked to his brother. "Nat, did you have any ideas about that?"

"I do," the blond Jedi nodded. "But it'll take time to scout the location."

"Then get to it, as soon as you can."

"I'll go to the triumvirs with this immediately," said Arlen. "Even if I don't get any promises, I should at least be able to get a reading. And I'll see what I can do about the hired help. I'll get back to you on both within twelve hours."

"Thank you for all this, Arlen," Jade said seriously. Lowbacca roared his own gratitude.

The human nodded grimly. "I never thought we'd be backed into a corner like this, but now that we are, we might have to use every weapon available to fight our way out. Even if they're not *Jedi* weapons."

Kol heaved a heavy sigh and lowered his head. For a long moment he seemed crushed by the awful aggregate weight of all his good intentions had reaped. When he looked up determination was like fire in his eyes. "We take what is given. We won't learn the truth behind all this if we're killed or driven into hiding. Today we survive. Tomorrow, we set things right."

Marin made the call to her father while *Runaround* still sat on the landing pad on Denon. She was glad she made the call before leaving, because the situation had suddenly gotten a lot more complicated.

"Four to seven days? That's the window you're looking at?" She pressed her back into *Runaround's* pilot seat and looked at her father's holo-image. "You can't get more specific?"

"Apparently not."

"Fierfek, Dad... That's not a lot of time to evacuate the Jedi Temple."

"The Jedi were scattered before. We don't want to have to run and hide again."

"Does that mean the Alliance will pull through for you?"

"I'm still working on the triumvirate. I have another meeting with them soon, but right now the Alliance is unreliable."

"You can say that again."

On the inbound flight to Denon she'd masochistically absorbed the latest news. Another fifty-nine worlds had declared their intention to join the seventy-eight and petition membership with the Empire. Nearly three hundred more had announced their refusal to send any of their people or equipment to help the Vong and their Jedi accomplices. If this kept going, there wouldn't be any Alliance left in seven days.

“Marin, we have to defend Ossus,” Arlen said firmly. “We have money. We can buy it if we have to. And that’s where we need your help again.”

Marin sat upright in her chair. She stared. Her father gave a short, knowing nod. “We need help now. It should be only a day’s ride out from Denon.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He tried a smile. “How long has it been since you’ve seen your mother?”

“You’re talking about Jedi hiring *Mandalorians*. To protect them from the *Empire*. Do you realize how insane that sounds?”

The smile vanished. “Have you looked at the state of the galaxy right now?”

“I have, I just...” She slumped in her chair. Alongside all the compounded absurdities was the knowledge that she wasn’t going to be running back to Benet and Ania as promised. She was getting dragged back into her past, into the dual lives she’d left behind, exactly as she hoped wouldn’t happen.

But when she weighed her humble life against everything else, the tipped-over scales didn’t budge.

“Do you know something about the state of Mandalore that I don’t?” asked Arlen.

“I’m not sure.” She gathered thoughts. “The current *Mand’alor* is Chernan Ordo. He’s well-liked. On good terms with pretty much all the clans, including the Skiratas. Gets the Mandos lots of business hiring out as mercs on Outer Rim skirmishes, but he avoids messy stuff like those Nagai invasions.” Those raids, and the joint Alliance-Imperial response, had fallen out of the news cycle the second the Ossus Project went wrong. It seemed like they’d happened years ago.

“Do you think he’d be willing to work for the Jedi?”

“He’d drive a hard bargain. *Mando* pride costs a lot.”

“But it can be bought. That’s why they’re mercenaries.”

Marin shrugged. “I’m just warning you. All those credits are being transferred to the Calrissians’ accounts as we speak.”

“Go back and talk to them. Make sure you’ll have a good chunk available. And tell them who you plan on hiring, so there’s no surprises.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be plenty surprised.” Marin sure as hells was. “But yes. I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Marin. Do what you can on your end, I’ll do what I can on mine. Send me a message to let me know when you’re leaving Denon.”

“Will do.”

“I love you,” Arlen said. “Good luck.”

The holo winked out. Marin settled back in her chair and wondered what to say to the Calrissians. Then she wondered what she would tell Benet and Ania. She didn’t want to look her daughter in the eye and tell her she’d be gone extra-long; she didn’t want to explain this all to Benet either, but those, too, had to be done.

Finally Marin recalled her father’s last words to her. Nothing about the Force being with her, not this time, which was fair enough. The Force wasn’t a very welcome commodity on Mandalore, but credits were, and so was luck. Those two things, she figured, were welcome anywhere.

Chapter Eight

“There is something moving here, something we cannot see,” Eshkar Niin said.

He sat with his apprentice in his personal quarters. A long day of scouring information on piled datapads had turned into night, and Draco was finally showing his long-rising frustration.

“Nothing *seems* suspect,” Draco sighed. “No cash injections into Konrad Rus’ accounts, or Seniac’s.”

“That it looks perfect is all the more reason to suspect it,” Niin said. “What about the intelligence reports indicating a Vong fleet in the Unknown Regions?”

“Those *are* more suspect. We haven’t found any verification and they haven’t lead to anything solid.”

“Those reports popped up just in time to sway an historic vote on the Moff Council. That can’t be a coincidence.”

“But we haven’t found anything unusual about Seniac. No hints of secret meetings, no credits in his bank accounts, nothing.”

“Look deeper, apprentice.” Niin tapped one of the datapads. “Something moves here beneath the surface. Perhaps none of the Council members, not even Veed or Geist, are knowingly a part, but a game is being played.”

Draco forced himself upright in his chair and look over the datapad. That one contained an index of the intel reports suggesting a Vong fleet buildup, with a focus on the provenance of each claim. “I see no pattern here,” Draco said

with a sigh. "Some of these reports come from third-parties not even affiliated with the Empire."

"So the reports claim. All those third-party sources in the Unknown Regions would be very hard to contact without Intel's know-how. Some might not even exist. Since we can't be sure, focus on what we *can* know. Look at Imperial agents who made the reports. Try to find a connection."

Draco looked markedly unenthusiastic about the prospect. Like too many young Imperial Knights, he was full of ardor and ambition but thought serving his Emperor came down to how well he swung a lightsaber. He wanted greatness and was impatient on achieving it. Niin had been much like Draco when younger, and even now, deep inside, he aspired to be greater than he now was. Niin had also learned that not all battles were fought with lightsabers; the most important were won by knowledge, careful planning, and long-term strategy. Their opponent here was a masterful player. Niin couldn't help but admire them for it.

Draco drew himself upright and began looking over the data again. With a faint smile, Niin said. "I'll get us both some caf."

Niin took his time preparing stimulant drinks for the two of them. After that he joined Draco at the table and began reviewing files. After an hour or so a pattern started to emerge, but he held back from speaking to see if Draco noticed as well. It took a while, but eventually his apprentice did.

"All of these intel reports came from either current or former subordinates to Moff Calixte,"

"Excellent," Niin said. "What can you tell me about her?"

"I know she's one of Seniac's top deputies. She has a ship of her own and she was the first one to report the Vongforming devastation."

"Yes, I thought that an interesting coincidence."

"You don't believe in coincidence." Draco reached for another datapad containing senior official profiles. He pulled up Calixte's biographical file and skimmed it over. "She's risen the ranks pretty quickly over the past decade. She's been with Intel all her adult life. A lot of this is still classified

but it says she did lots of field work outside Imperial Space, mostly in the Core and the Colonies.”

“Where was she born? What about her family?”

“It says here she’s from Jaemus. Mother dead in a speeder accident. Father dead from a congenital disease. No siblings. Married to Admiral Rulf Yage for a total of sixteen months, now divorced. One offspring, age ten. That’s something to poke at quietly.”

“Education?”

“Civilian schools on Jaemus, followed by Intel training. Details classified, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Niin echoed. “How does that all strike you?”

Draco’s lips twisted in thought. “Except for her ascension over the past decade, everything seems very... normal.”

“Too much so?”

Draco nodded. “Nothing in that record hints at someone whose career would rocket her to Seniac’s right hand.”

“No. It doesn’t, does it?”

“Well,” Draco said, “What do you suggest we do about her? All we’ve got is suspicion.”

“I know. And Calixte might not have anything to do with any of this... but she *might*. We’ll have to investigate her background and watch her without letting her know she’s being watched. And anyone in Calixte’s line of work will be very alert, so we must be careful.”

“We should keep looking at our other options also.”

“Very true, apprentice.”

“This will be a lot of work, Master Niin. Have you thought about bringing more Knights on to help?”

The Iktotchi shook his head. “We can’t afford the risk. It’s hard enough for two men to keep a secret.”

Draco’s eyes went wide. “You doubt the loyalty of the other Knights?”

“No, but the more people are involved, the less safe *any* secret becomes. Calixte is the type of person who’d know that.”

The young human nodded soberly. “I understand, Master. I guess this will be the whole of our activities for a while.”

“For a while, yes.”

Draco tried a faint smile. "Then I guess it's good the Emperor has pledged to keep us out of any fighting."

He said it like a man trying unsuccessfully to convince himself. Niin was not entirely convinced the rightness of the Emperor's choice, but that was not a doubt he'd voice to his apprentice. Doubts or not, they'd serve Roan Fel as they'd sworn to. Master and apprentice had that much, at least, in common.

"The vote tally's come in from the Hapan Senate," Elliah told her husband. "They've decided to remain neutral in whatever comes."

"Good news at last," Roan said.

His tone was labored, bitter. He stood before the broad window of their personal chamber, a silhouette against the nighttime glow of Ravelin's skyline. Elliah approached her husband from behind and placed a hand on his shoulder. He didn't react visibly, but she detected a slight softening from him in the Force.

"The vote was bound to go that way," she told him. "The Hapans never rebuilt their military to what it was before. They couldn't throw in much to this fight even if they wanted to."

"Make sure they know the Empire doesn't hold their decision against them."

"I will." After a pause she asked, "Have Eshkar and Draco found anything?"

"Perhaps," he said, and nothing else. She knew she wouldn't get any more.

Since the vote at the Moff Council, Roan had entered a state of brooding quiet. After almost thirty years, Elliah knew her husband's tendency to withdraw. Emotions were not meant to be shared and flaunted; they were not meant to be seen at all, not when you were a royal figure held up as the symbol of power and righteousness for billions of beings. Having been raised by Hapan aristocrats, Elliah knew that well. But she also knew that there was humanity in Roan and his Imperials nurtured by their noble purpose; that was what had drawn her to the Imperial Knights, and Roan in

particular. They were so different from the nobles among whom she'd been raised; so much better.

She hooked her arm around his and sent feelings to him in the Force; soft, warm. He yielded just a little more.

"We are being pulled by an unknown hand," Roan said, almost in whisper. "I should have seen this coming. I should have prevented it. That I didn't is a black mark against me. An emperor should be stronger than that."

"No emperor can see everything. Even with the Force."

"It's still a failing. And for that the galaxy is led to a darker place." He allowed a tiny sigh. "I think I became... complacent. Soft."

"You've never been a soft man," she said, without judgment.

"For my whole reign, the Empire achieved victory without war. But this Empire- the empire my father and grandfather built- came through war. This next one will either destroy or preserve it. I can't let it fall. I have a legacy that must be passed on to Marasiah."

She felt the anger surge within him and combine with intent. "We can't fight darkness with darkness. We're Imperial Knights and sworn to the light."

"And will the light be enough to save our Empire? Look at the Jedi. They should have never launched the Ossus Project in the first place. Their idealism will drag the whole galaxy into darkness."

"But they still serve the light."

"Perhaps. But they've unwittingly aided the dark." *As have I*, she felt from him.

"That's no reason to wittingly invite the dark." She moved her hand down to grip his firmly. "Remember that, husband. If you do that, you betray everything your father and grandfather built. Then *you* destroy the legacy yourself, not your hidden enemy." Elliah felt her words get through to him; felt a flush of shame. She added, very softly, "Do not let your pride destroy you, husband."

"Your point is well taken." He squeezed her hand. "I'm fortunate to have you at my side, keeping me honest with myself."

"The way out of this won't come through pride, or fear, or anger," Elliah said. "I don't know where it *will* come from, but we can find it together. I promise."

The *Oyu'baat* tapcafe had stood at the heart of Mandalore's capital Keldabe for centuries, maybe millennia. It looked the part, with stone walls, hand-carved wooden tables and chairs, an authentic flame furnace, and coverless windows through which strong wind whistled on cold, fire-warmed winter nights. Regardless of season, day, or hour, the storied watering hole was invariably packed with armored warriors who'd removed their T-visor helms to swig from bucket-sized cups of ale and swap outrageous lies about past exploits.

It was also, in the deliberately informal manner of Mandalorians, the site of countless history-changing parleys and decisions. This bout of deal-making took place in a private dining room, where three figures sat on either side of a low-slung wooden table laden-down with hot meals and cold beverages.

One on side: three women, unarmored. Chereth Calrissian was in the center; Marin had been surprised when she'd volunteered to come to Mandalore, but Chereth had insisted that for high-level business negotiations it would be critical to have a high-level businesswoman doing the talking. She'd been right, and she'd done most of the talking so far. Marin, who wore a similar suit and had been introduced as Chereth's assistant, mostly watched. The third woman, on Chereth's other side, wore a simple tunic instead of the black-and-blue *beskar* she'd once sported. Tamar Skirata had a turbulent history as a Mandalorian, but by now she'd settled into the role of respected matriarch for her clan. Marin knew she looked like her mother thirty years younger, and she hoped Tamar's short-cropped white hair and age-worn features obscured the resemblance.

On the other side: three men, all in *beskar* armor, helmets removed for the purpose of eating, drinking, and negotiating. In the center was the reigning *Mand'alor*, Chernan Ordo. The gleam of his silver-white armor was in stark contrast to

the dark tone of his face but somehow matched the bright inquisitive glare in his eyes. He'd brought two of his lieutenants along. One was a red-haired man in green armor with violet highlights named Kral Vevec. Marin had never met him, but she'd heard of him spoken of as one of Ordo's long-time supporters.

The other man wore green and gold armor and had introduced himself as Yaga Auchs.

It took all Marin's effort not to stare. He had a lean face, with a brush of short-cut brown hair running down the middle of his head. She'd seen that face before, on a frightened soft-faced boy, twenty-seven years ago as she'd fought him and killed his father, Kaynar Auchs. She'd killed Yaga's uncle too, *Mand'alor* Gevern Auchs, eight years before that. She'd been defending her mother at the time and hadn't even meant to take Gevern's head from his shoulders; it had been the first time she'd killed anyone. With Kaynar it has been different. That had been blood for blood, retribution for Kaynar's murder of two Skiratas, which was in turn revenge for Gevern.

Marin had stopped calling herself a Jedi- or a Fel, or a Skirata- shortly thereafter.

That terrified boy's face had haunted Marin for years, hounding her with guilt and shame. It wasn't until she'd settled down with Benet and had Ania that she finally felt she'd escaped it. And now, just like the rest of her past lives, it was all coming back on her.

Blood feuds were an old custom on Mandalore, and they very often spun out of control. After Kaynar's death, a Mando magistrate had ruled the scales of vengeance balanced out: two dead Skiratas for two dead Auchs. The Skiratas had been in no mood to pursue things further. Yaga, just a teenager, with no other family members willing to back him, had slunk away, presumably to a life of petty bounty hunting or assassin work.

But now he was right here, at the *Mand'alor's* side, directly across the table from Tamar. That was the one small mercy; if Marin was forced to look directly into that face she didn't think she'd be able to take it. Tamar, to her credit,

took his glares with aplomb. She didn't meet his eyes and didn't rise to any bait.

"I never thought I'd see Mandos doing dirty work for *jeti*," Auchs shook his head.

"They've worked for Sith before," said Tamar, "This is just the other side of the coin."

Auchs' scowl deepened. He didn't need any reminder that his uncle Gevern had been close to Sith and gotten killed over it. Ordo frowned as well and said, "Force-users are generally trouble, no matter which way it goes. But what really matters is whether they can pay."

"We've already agreed on a price," Chereth said evenly. It had taken thirty minutes of haggling and they'd ultimately agreed on a hefty fee.

"True, assuming you're good for it. Those *jeti* monastic robes don't scream excess wealth."

"The Jedi Order's finances are well in order and certainly capable of paying you for a one-time service."

"And you know this, how? You've told us you're no Jedi."

"I'm just their financial advisor." Chereth gave a confident, tightlipped smile.

"Interesting how they didn't send anyone to speak on their behalf." Ordo's eyes passed over the three women and lingered on Marin.

"Anissa is no Jedi," Chereth said. They'd agreed on Marin's pseudonym right before the meeting. "Just a valued assistant."

"So we can rest assured nobody's reading our minds," Auchs said sarcastically and looked at Tamar. That Marin's mother had had an unsuccessful stint at Ossus was no secret, not to a man with a lifelong vested interest in the Skirata family. Auchs might have also heard the rumor that Tamar had birthed a daughter with a Jedi.

"Think of it this way," Tamar said. "Once the Mandos ride to the Jedi's rescue, they can lord it over the Force-users for the next hundred years."

Vevec looked intrigued. Auchs snorted and kept glaring. Chereth broke the tension by removing a datacard from her vest and placing it in the center of the table, next to the

remnants of Ordo's spiced nerf dish. "This contains access info for a special account. Twenty minutes after we leave here you'll see an initial deposit of twenty percent of the agreed fee. You'll get forty percent more if you bring the agreed-on number of Mandos to Ossus within three days. The remaining forty percent will be released if and only if your people get into a combat situation."

"You sounded pretty sure of that," Vevec said.

"What if the Alliance decides to ride to your rescue?" asked Ordo.

"It doesn't effect your payment. If your people engage the enemy at all, you'll get paid the last forty percent."

"I suppose we have to trust the *jeti* to be honest," grouched Auchs.

"By my reckoning the Jedi are a lot more trustworthy than some of our other past employers," said Tamar.

That got her another glare from Auchs, but Ordo took the datacard delicately. "Twenty minutes," he said.

"I just need to get back to my ship and access my accounts," said Chereth.

The card disappeared into his palm. "Then you'd best get going."

Chereth didn't budge. "So we have a deal? Ten thousand warriors over Ossus within the next four days?"

"You've got it."

Auchs scowled again but didn't argue with his *Mand'alor*. Ordo stood up and extended a hand across the table. Chereth did the same and they shook. Two minutes after that the three women slipped out the front doors of the *Oyu'baat* into the narrow winding streets of Keldabe, making their fastest route to the spaceport where *Runaround* was parked.

As they walked Tamar took out a portable comlink and whispered a few words of *Mando'a* that Marin still, more or less, understood. A couple Skiratas were hanging in the street behind them, covering their backs and watching for tails.

"I wish I'd known Yaga Auchs was going to be there," Marin said once she was done.

Tamar shook her head. "I had no idea, I'm sorry."

"What is he, part of some rival clan?" asked Chereth.

"Something like that." Marin definitely wasn't getting into the details.

"I knew Auchs had been making overtures to the *Mand'ador*," Tamar said. "Trying to get into his good graces."

"Ordo has a reputation as a bridge-builder," Marin recalled.

"Exactly." Tamar threw Chereth a scrap of explanation. "Auchs' uncle used to be *Mand'ador*. He was the one who hired his people out as a Sith Lord's private army during the Senex-Juvex Crisis."

Chereth nodded. "I remember hearing about that from my father."

"Later Gevern worked with the Restorationists against Davek Fel and got killed over it. Ultimately, the Auchs fell into disgrace and obscurity. But I guess Yaga had enough backing to end up one of the *Mand'ador*'s lieutenants. As you can see he's no fan of the Skiratas. Or the Jedi."

"I don't like him sitting on Ordo's shoulder," said Marin.

Tamar shrugged, noncommittal. "Like you said, Ordo builds coalitions. And you can bet having Auchs in the room today was a negotiating tactic."

"I thought as much," Chereth said. "He acted extra-hostile, Vevac was more conciliatory. Ordo got to present himself to us as a moderating authority figure."

"I don't think Auchs's hostility was an act, but that's about right. You pick Mando posturing pretty quick."

"Business is business. Some tactics are pretty universal."

"I still didn't like being there with him." Marin sighed and asked her mother, "Did you pick up anything from him in the Force?"

"You mean besides hostility?" The old woman shook her head. "He felt pretty straight-forward, actually. And his anger was directed at me more than you."

"That's something," Marin muttered. She ignored the question in Chereth's look.

"I think Vevac was putting on more of a front," Tamar continued. "Like you said, he was playing a pro-Jedi role. Inside he's more skeptical."

“What about Ordo?” asked Chereth. “He’s the one that really matters.”

“I didn’t sense any duplicity. I sensed he was mostly worried about convincing his men to fight with Jedi. But Mandos will do anything for enough money.”

They dropped into silence as they continued the brisk walk back to the spaceport. Eventually Chereth said, “Tendrando needs to hire some Jedi as consultants.”

“I’ll pass that along to my dad.” Marin allowed a small smile.

“If they’re hard-up for cash, they just might slum for it,” said Tamar.

“Well, we’re doing what we can to alleviate that too,” Chereth said as they passed through the checkpoint and into the spaceport complex. “As we speak, Volgma should be carefully distributing your liquid assets into stocks for maximum profit.”

“War is good for business,” Marin explained to her mother, not that an old Mando needed to be told.

“Furthermore,” Chereth said, “You don’t have to worry about forking over that initial twenty percent. My father insisted on taking care of that one.”

“Wait, what?” Marin said as they approached *Runaround*’s berth. “You can’t use Tendrando money to pay for-”

“Technically not Tendrando. This first payment’s coming from one of my father’s personal accounts.”

“I... I don’t know what to say. Thank you, of course. Thank you so much.”

“Calrissians have always been friends to Jedi.” Chereth smiled softly.

Once they reached the ship, Marin opened the airlock and ushered Chereth inside. As the businesswoman started up the communications system and got ready to transfer Chance’s funds, Marin lingered at the rear of the cabin with her mother.

In a low voice she said, “Ten thousand Mando warriors armed and ready over Ossus. I still can’t believe it’s going to happen. Mom, are you *sure* we can trust them?”

“I didn’t sense Ordo was lying.”

"But things can change. Say, he can get a better offer and instead of showing up with his ten thousand to *protect* Ossus, he'll come along to slag it instead."

"That's a risk we have to take." Tamar put a hand on her shoulder. "I won't be going on that mission but Jind and some of your other cousins will. They'll keep their eyes and ears open, and if there's any sign of treachery, they'll let the Jedi know."

"That's good. Thanks, Mom."

"You could have used the Force on them too, you know. Gotten yourself a second opinion."

Marin exhaled. "Still trying to stay away from that."

"You have the Force. You can use it in little bits and pieces and it won't make you a Jedi. Or a Sith."

"That may be true for you. But I was *raised* to be a Jedi. It took me a lot of time to unlearn all that. It took a long time, but *not* using the Force is what feels natural now. I don't want to risk reversing all that." She didn't want to say that everything else- the Calrissians and Volgma, Keldabe and Mandalore, just talking with her parents- made her feel like she was backsliding hard.

"Do you want me to give your regards to Dad?" she asked instead.

The corner of Tamar's mouth tugged upward, creating that tight, ironic smile she usually got when Arlen was mentioned. "Sure. Has he gotten any joints or vital organs replaced recently?"

"Not that I know of."

"And he's not forgetting where he left the keys to the *Champion*?"

"He's doing fine."

"In spite of his advanced age? Well, tell him I asked."

"I will." More seriously she added, "Thanks for setting this up on short notice."

"You know, the way things were going, I had a feeling you'd make contact."

"A feeling? Or the Force?"

The old woman shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Major galactic crises seem to draw our family together."

Marin knew them all, even the ones she hadn't been alive for: the Senex-Juvex Crisis, the Restoration War in the Empire, the liberation of Hapes, now this. Her mother had a point, but inside Marin revolted.

"I'm not a Fel anymore, or a Skirata."

"I know. You've gone Solo." Tamar touched her daughter's hair. "Old ties still bind. Even when you don't want them to."

He emerged from rage as though from a dream. The Nagai once called Relik K'sharn found himself sitting among the smoldering ruins of some primitive village. Fire had made blackened husks of thatched-wood huts and alien corpses. Soft wind carried ash and the smell of roasted flesh. When he looked at his hands they were caked in soot and blood; some his own, some from others.

Just barely he remembered the dream of rage: endless motion, killing and killing with any weapon he could find and when those broke he'd used his hands. He'd been impelled by infinite anger and a need that could only be expressed through slaughter.

Beneath that was another layer, even fainter. Beneath the dream of rage was a dream of agony: endless writhing and screaming and pleading for mercy as strange Yuuzhan Vong bio-machinery kept him pinned and trapped and subjected him to one type of pain after another, unceasing in its vicious ministration. The Embrace of Pain, it had been called.

On liberation from that embrace, his first act had been a slaughter.

The Nagai tried to stand up. His weak legs gave out and dropped him on scorched earth and all he could do was look in stunned awe at what he'd wrought. As a warlord for his people he'd created countless scenes such as this, but always with a purpose in mind. Devastation had always been a means toward higher ascension. He'd never destroyed with no other purpose in mind, and never done it all with his own hands.

He was horrified at the powers that lay within him, but also, deep down, amazed at himself. He struggled to reconcile

these emotions when a figure emerged from the smoke and stalked purposely toward him. The tall, long-limbed humanoid moved smoothly on birdlike reverse-articulated legs. When he stopped, three-toed feet splayed out a meter in front of the Nagai, Darth Vorkan looked down at him and said, "The first time I experienced the Embrace of Pain, I lashed out and killed the two servants who released me from it. Darth Krayt was impressed that I converted agony into power so easily."

The author of destruction looked into Vorkan's small eyes and tried to judge what he found there. "Are you afraid of me?" he rasped. He wanted to hear a *yes*.

The Blood Carver surveyed the damaged. "You have a talent for violence. However, to serve the Sith this talent must be tamed, honed, and forged into a useful weapon. You must master *yourself*. Until then, you cannot be Sith."

That wasn't an answer. "Are you *afraid*?"

The Blood Carver looked down at him. "You are no danger to me. You are nothing. Perhaps someday it will be different, but not now."

The condescension stung, all the more because it was deserved. The Nagai felt rage within him resolve like a sharpening memory, but his body was too exhausted to rise. More, Darth Vorkan was right. His powers, for now, were inchoate and unrefined. As a warlord, he knew that training and discipline made an army as much as zeal.

But zeal was also important. He looked around and realized that this pointless, ugly manifestation of primal rage was also a mean of ascension.

"Where are we?" he asked Vorkan.

"A planet called Wayland."

He looked again at the corpses. Humanoid bodies, two legs, four arms. Though most of them had been charred to the bone a few still had flesh intact. He saw patches of rough skin like the coral growth Darth Maladi had shown while proudly explaining her plans.

"This world... Vong-formed?"

"Correct. Everything we've wrought began here. Darth Krayt thought it fitting that your journey begin here, too."

He remembered everything else he'd been shown by Maladi, Vorkan, and Krayt. "What is happening... elsewhere?"

"Events are moving swiftly." Vorkan said with faint pride.

"The fight... against the Jedi?"

"Proceeding, but we will not reveal ourselves. Not yet. There is no need to when our pawns are accomplishing their tasks so well."

"But what is happening?"

"Would you like to see?" Vorkan sounded curious.

The Nagai looked around once more. It seemed slightly absurd to be obsessed with events happening far away when surrounded by such carnage, carnage he had wrought while lost in unthinking rage. But he understood now that everything that had happened was connected; this slaughter on Wayland, the planet's ruination, the design against the Jedi that had taken decades to enact. He was a piece of that design and a small one, but just by being Sith his actions had more import than everything he'd done as a warlord in the Outer Rim. In losing his former power he was accessing a greater one.

"Yes," the Nagai rasped. "I want to be a part of everything. Show me what is happening."

"And you pledge to serve Darth Krayt's design in all things?"

"Of course."

Vorkan extended a three-clawed hand. The Nagai stared at it but did not take it. Instead he found strength to push off the scorched earth and rise on sore, shaking legs. The devastated world spun around him but he steadied himself, drew in a deep breath of ash-filled air, and waited for the scene he'd wrought to go still.

Darth Vorkan let his hands fall to his side. "Come," he said. "The next war is about to begin."

Chapter Nine

The first hostile ships to appear over Ossus numbered nearly two dozen and ranged from heavily armed freighters to corvettes to refitted Galactic Alliance frigates. All in all, it was a modest complement, especially compared to the Mandalorian vessels sitting in lower orbit. Mandalorians, as a rule, did not go in for heavy sluggish cruisers. The largest ships in their fleet, four *Teroch*-class assault frigates, were comparable in size to their Alliance-built counterparts but packed more firepower, shields, and armor.

Mandalorian ships were built for fast hard attacks. Defense was not their usual mode, but the mere sight of them was enough to stop the charge by the incoming vessels. Instead the rouge fleet spread out in upper orbit and held position, facing off with the Mandalorians across hundreds of kilometers of void.

Deep within the bowels of the Jedi Temple, a collection of Masters watched the scene play out via tactical holo. It took great effort for Kol Skywalker to project composure, on his face and in the Force. The Mandalorians had arrived promptly, sooner even than Arlen Fel had promised they would. It was good they had, because the attacking fleet showed up early too. The Jedi hadn't had time to evacuate the younglings or the special archives from the Temple as planned, and as he watched the holo Kol could feel his son pulsing anger and anxiety in the Force. Cade hadn't been happy with being sent to the secret chambers beneath the temple with all the other children; he'd wanted to do his part

and fight. Kol had told him someone needed to protect the younger children in case of emergency, which had mollified Cade only a little.

If these attackers really did get to the younglings, then the whole temple would already be lost.

"They're not budging," the aged Neti master T'ra Saa observed. "Perhaps they're reconsidering."

Kol shook his head. "I was told they'd have at least fifty ships, including an old star destroyer. This is just the first wave."

"The Mandalorians seem to have taken them by surprise." Nat sounded faintly hopeful.

"They are not the only ones," said K'Kruhk.

Kol's mother, standing small beside the Whipid, muttered, "I just hope we can trust them."

Kol had a feeling they'd learn the worth of what they paid very soon. The Jedi watched the holo in tense silence for what seemed like forever; in truth, only a few minutes passed before more lights appeared on the display, marking new arrivals.

One big wedge sat at the heart of the formation. It could only be the old *Predator*-class destroyer the Rodians had found. Kol counted around fifty ships, as many as his ex-wife had predicted. She hadn't contacted him since that encrypted call to his shuttle. He hoped that meant her intel hadn't changed, but her actions were frustratingly unpredictable.

In any case, this ragtag angry fleet would mean little if the Imperials decided to get involved.

"Now they're hailing us," Nat reported.

"Not the Mandalorians?" asked T'ra Saa.

"No. They're asking for us directly." Nat looked to his brother. "They want *you*."

"All right." Kol stiffened. "Open a link."

Beneath the tactical holo, a second, smaller holo appeared. The image of a Rodian projected in front of Kol, and the alien's snout twitched angrily as she said, "I am Admiral Keelu of the star destroyer *Recompense*."

Kol wondered if there was anything official behind that title. "I am Jedi Master Kol Skywalker, leader of the Jedi Council."

"I know who you are," Keelu snarled. "We have come here to seek justice."

"The Jedi seek justice as well." Kol tried his most reasonable tone, knowing it wouldn't work.

"Then stop shielding those who have savaged our galaxy and despoiled our worlds, two times over! This is your last chance, Jedi Skywalker. Hand over your Vong or we will take them ourselves."

Kol glanced at Nei Rin, who stood silent and stoic at the room's dark edge. "Our Yuuzhan Vong had no part in the ruin of your world. Killing them would only be another injustice."

"You Jedi and your righteous lies," Keelu shook her head. "In the name of forgiveness you shield mass murderers. Your 'good intentions' wreak untold horrors on the galaxy!"

Kol had heard that accusation more or less constantly over the past weeks but it still stung. Deep down, he wasn't sure it was wrong.

He said, "Punishing the innocent will solve nothing. Please, power down your weapons and we will work *together* to find the true culprits. The Jedi are willing to negotiate."

"Stall for time, you mean."

"I am willing to come to your ship and discuss this personally, right now."

That took Keelu by surprise. The other Jedi radiated shock too, especially Jade and Nat, but none of them interrupted as the Rodian seemed to consider this offer.

But instead she said, "We will accept the Vong, none other. If you will not give them to us, we will take them by force."

"As you can see, we're defended."

"Yes. That was unexpected. But we are prepared to fight."

"I don't doubt it."

"You've left us no choice, Master Skywalker." Keelu shook her head, and for a moment sorrow diluted the anger in her voice. "History will condemn you for what you've done here. It could have been otherwise."

"I would say the same to you, Admiral."

"Only one of us will be right. I await our vindication. *Recompense*, out."

The Rodian's holo disappeared. Kol looked to his brother and said, "It's time. Get our fighters in the air."

"Gladly." Nat began giving orders on his personal comlink to the thirty-six Jedi-piloted starfighters waiting in the Temple's hangar bay. Three squadrons of Twintails would help slow the advancing tide but couldn't turn it, even with Jedi pilots. Ultimately the fate of the Order was in the hands of their hired protectors- Mandalorians, of all the damned people.

Defending the temple instead of fleeing was an incredible gamble, but to have abandoned it would have plunged the Jedi into darkness not known since Palpatine and the Yuuzhan Vong War. Kol would not allow his good intentions to wreak such damage. Admission of weakness was admission of defeat. The Jedi had to make their stand.

Less than a minute after the Twintails launched, the attacking ships lurched into motion. Half of them merged into formation around *Recompense* and plunged toward the planet, while other spread out to guard the group's aft and flanks. As for the Mandos, their *Teroch*-class frigates and *Crusader*-class corvettes moved swiftly to block the advance. Two minutes after that, new lights sparked on the holo denoting laserfire and missiles exchanged.

The battle was joined.

By the time Nyna Calixte arrived in the situation room inside the emperor's palace, most senior officials had already joined Roan Fel and his wife at the central table. Seniac was there, as were Veed and several more fleet admirals, though Supreme Commander Kaylac was notably absent.

Calixte took an empty seat next to Seniac, who didn't seem to notice her arrival. She glanced across the room to Veed, who acknowledged her with only a tiny nod before turning his attention back to the conversation between Fel and the holo-projected image of an alien admiral. Calixte was no expert at differentiating between Rodians, but she guessed

this was Keelu, the militia-leader she'd already met in private. It hadn't taken much to turn her ambition into action.

Fel, however, was clearly displeased with her initiative. "You agreed to accede to *my* authority, Keelu. *Mine*." He pounded a fist against his chest. "That was the entire reason I very *generously* allowed your people to join the Empire."

"We seceded from the Alliance because they wouldn't take action against those who despoiled our worlds," Keelu said. "We joined you because you promised to back us."

"Any action should have been taken in consultation with myself and my supreme commander."

Calixte looked around the table again. Still no Kaylac. Keelu said, "We are acting, Emperor. You promised you would support us. Back up your promises or not, we don't care. We will press ahead either way."

The holo shut off abruptly, leaving Fel to wrestle his anger under control. What the Rodian had said was plainly untrue; the ragtag coalition of militias might be able to force its way to Ossus and attack the Jedi, but without Imperial help it would take heavy losses against those Mandalorians.

Calixte refrained a smirk; however the Jedi had gotten money to hire mercenaries, they'd gone with the best. Even after all this time, Kol could still surprise her.

Seniac cleared his throat and told Fel, "If we move in, it's more likely the Alliance will intervene."

"I'm quite aware of that," the emperor glowered.

"We made our pact with those people," Veed said. "We can't break our word after a week."

"They've already broken theirs."

"Yes, but we are the *Empire*, not some angry desperate band. Confrontation with the Alliance is a risk we'll have to take."

"A risk?" Fel's glower deepened as he stared at Veed. "That confrontation is what you've wanted, Admiral, isn't it? It's what you've been aiming for all this time."

"Whatever choice we make, we have to make it quickly," Seniac said, but it didn't draw Fel's stare away from Veed.

Calixte decided now was the time to speak. "I may have missed it, but where is the supreme commander?"

Fel exhaled sharply. "Standing by for further instruction."

"Then we shouldn't keep him waiting." Calixte held his eyes. "My Lord, I think we have no choice but to join in the attack."

His eyes narrowed, suspicious, evaluating. Calixte was confident she'd kept her liaison with Veed hidden thus far, but she still had to speak carefully. In her most measured tone she said, "We've publicly made these people our allies. If we don't stand with them, we'll look as weak as the Alliance does right now."

"I'm quite aware."

"More importantly, sir, if we can't control the situation at Ossus without a fleet. You've refused to allow Imperial Knights on the front lines and you're trying to avoid a direct confrontation with the Jedi. We understand that. We all know you have relatives among the Jedi."

"My decision will not be dictated by family ties. I would not have our Empire replicate Palpatine's purges. We are *better* than that."

She didn't believe his judgment was free of personal considerations; hers certainly weren't. When interacting with Fel she normally put a mental wall around herself, shielding herself from his senses as she'd sometimes shielded herself from Kol's.

Now she allowed herself to exude honesty as she said, "Sir, I do not desire the destruction of the Jedi any more than you do. If Keelu's people break past the Mandos and reach the surface, it could be a massacre, and your name will be attached whether you like it or not. If you want to save those Jedi, we must join the attack."

She kept her eyes on Fel as he thought on that, but at the corner of her vision she caught Veed smirking. The fool thought she'd tossed out a lie to hide her real motives.

Seniac said, "Moff Calixte has a point. We either take control or we lose control."

But it was more complicated than that, especially for Fel. Calixte could see it in his eyes. He knew he'd been outmaneuvered by the Moff Council vote and knew the same had happened here. He knew that by sending ships to Ossus

he would contain this current battle but lose control of the larger war.

And she knew that her words to him struck home. As a child, before the Imperial Knights even existed, Roan Fel had been trained as a Jedi, and he would not stand by and allow his former kin to be slain in his name.

Deliberately, slowly, Roan Fel tapped the comm panel on the table and said, "Admiral Kaylac, do you read?"

A half-second later: "Standing by, Your Majesty."

"I hereby authorize the use of our troops at Ossus. Priority One is to drive the Mandalorians from orbit. Priority Two is to interdict the Jedi Temple. Do *not* use lethal force against the Jedi. Surrounded the temple and prevent their escape, but no not send stormtroopers to engage them directly."

"Understood, Majesty. Is there anything else?"

"Once our fleet arrives, Admiral Keelu is subject to *our* authority. Make sure she understands that."

"Very good, Majesty."

"That is all. Thank you, Admiral." Fel tapped off the connection and looked around the table. "It is done, then."

"You've made the right choice, sir," said Veed, which only earned him another glare.

"How long will it take for our ships to reach Ossus?" Calixte asked.

"Elements from the Second Fleet left Celanon the moment the attack began," Fel said. "Admiral Fenel should arrive within the next thirty minutes."

The disparate beings who'd joined together to attack Ossus could be faulted for many things, but a lack of daring was not one of them. Four thousand kilometers above the Jedi Temple, space blazed with explosions and laserblasts and swirling missile thrust-trails as their ships tried to force through the Mandalorian blockade. They seemed to have scrounged up every kind of attack ship imaginable, from ancient Corellian blockade runners and X-wings to refurbished TIE-X interceptors and KDY *Kontos*-class frigates. A trio of swift Corporate Sector marauders had even joined in. The Mandalorians fought with blunt-faced frigates

and corvettes and T-shaped Beskad fighters that could outmaneuver anything their opponents wielded.

In the midst of all this chaos were thirty-six Jedi starfighters. Formed together in pairs and trios they darted through the fray, attacking targets and falling back or picking off the few snubfighters that slipped through the Mandalorian line. To the Mandos and attackers alike, their actions must have looked like an incoherent jumble. To the Jedi themselves it was an elaborate, deadly dance choreographed through the collective awareness of all the pilots in the battle meld.

Lowbacca, squeezed tight in the cockpit of his Twintail, felt all those thoughts flowing through the meld and tried to keep them all in steady equilibrium. Like his uncle Chewbacca, flying had come early and naturally to him. Right now, it barely required conscious thought to weave around a flight of enemy D-wing bombers, circle back on their rear, and pump laserfire through the closest one's shields. More difficult was moderating the thoughts and emotions, actions and reactions, of all his Jedi pilots. He'd first been exposed to battle melds during the Yuuzhan Vong War, when Jacen Solo's natural empathy had opened the minds of young Jedi Knights to each other, but that had exposed division as much as it fostered unity.

So he tried to smooth out anger and calm aggression. Even as his laserfire lit up the D-wing ahead of him, sending the others to scatter, he was reading Wolf Sazen's anxiety while under fire and wordlessly ordering his son Karrashchakuk to help.

At the same time he felt another cry in the battle-meld, closer by, and veered to find it. He spotted two Twintails darting after an armored shuttle as it slipped past a Mandalorian corvette and dove straight toward the planet's surface. Lowbacca dove after it, joining the two Jedi and a handful of Mandalorian Beskads in pursuit.

The two closest ships were the Twintails, but the shuttle was pumping out heavy laserfire from an aft cannon. He recognized Ayen Qemar, a Nautolan Master and one of the Order's best pilots, along with her apprentice. A Rybet,

Lowbacca remembered, but he couldn't remember her name. He could feel determination emanating from the two Jedi pilots as they kept up their attack, but their laserfire couldn't break through the shuttle's shields. The ship seemed to have shunted power from engines to aft defenses as it let gravity and inertia pull it toward the surface.

If Qemar and her apprentice didn't have any missiles left in their Twintails, it was up to Lowbacca. He sent a message to them both in the Force, telling them to fall back so he could get a target lock. Qemar slipped back but her apprentice hung tight on the shuttle, still stubbornly pumping laserfire into its shields. He felt Qemar's agitation, and her insistence that the apprentice obey orders.

Then a laserblast from the shuttle took the Twintail head-on. The starfighter simply burst into a blossom of flame that quickly disappeared, leaving only raining shrapnel behind. Ayen Qemar's shock and grief rippled through the Force and Lowbacca did everything he could to prevent it from overtaking the battle meld. The apprentice's death had not gone unnoticed, but Lowbacca forced his pilots to concentrate on the threats ahead, the problems they could solve.

The Wookiee did just that. He dropped his targeting reticule on the shuttle, kicked his engines to speed his plunge, and waited as the range-marker counted down, one claw on the missile trigger. Just as he unleashed his shot and sent one warhead streaking forward, three more joined. Lowbacca glanced to his flank, saw the Mandalorian Beskads had released missiles of their own, then looked back to the shuttle. His warhead hit the shields first and impacted in a flash of light; then the Mando missiles joined in, and the next flash was an explosion that combusted the shuttle's aft section, devouring engines and reactors. That sent what was left tumbling wildly through the atmosphere, where flame and friction devoured it.

An unfamiliar voice crackled over Lowbacca's long-silent comlink. "No need to thank us, *jet*i, just doing our job."

Lowbacca sent a roar of thanks anyway, not that he expected them to understand.

As the Mandalorians turned around and gunned their engines back to orbit, Lowbacca sidled along Qemar's fighter and sent her a note of bittersweet victory through the Force-meld. What he got back was deep sorrow, and the knowledge that there was still more fighting to be done.

One Jedi dead, the first of the day, and probably not the last. Gone forever, just like Lowbacca's daughter, like so many friends, like countless Jedi he'd watched grow up, grow old, and die. He felt ashamed to have forgotten this apprentice's name, then wondered if he'd ever known it at all.

As he and Qemar began their climb back to lower orbit, the battle above looked more congested than ever, clogged with more numerous and larger ships than he recalled. He reached deeper into the battle meld and felt a fresh wave of surprise run through his pilots.

Shock made their disparate minds a jumble and he struggled to make sense of it. He flicked on his comlink to request audio clarification when Nat Skywalker's voice scratched in his ear.

"All pilots, this is ground control. A fleet of Imperial Star Destroyers has just entered the system."

They stared at each other from across a distance of light-years: one man and one blue electric ghost. Kol knew that, far away on Bastion, this tableau reversed itself in Roan Fel's situation room, but with one crucial difference. Emperor Fel was safe on his capital; Kol and his Jedi had two angry fleets pressing down from above.

As Kol stared at the emperor's holographic face he tried to remember the conversation he, his mother, and Arlen had had with the man aboard *Starlight Champion*. He knew that Fel had pledged to avoid conflict with the Jedi, but it felt so long ago he could barely recall it.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this, Master Skywalker," Fel said. "Admiral Keelu was overambitious and acted without my authority. I am here to restrain her."

Above Roan Fel's image, holo-markers still signaled clashing ships.

"Make her pull her fleet back," Kol said.

"I will, but only if you command your Mandalorians to do the same."

"I will not leave the Jedi Temple undefended. We have younglings, Emperor Fel. Would you slaughter children like our ancestor, Darth Vader?"

Fel couldn't hide his wince. "My intention is to land troops on the surface of Ossus. We will not step foot inside your academy."

"No, you'll just lay siege to it and trap us inside. Didn't Corrien Veers do that to *you* when you were a boy on Bastion? Your father went to war to protect the Jedi. Should I do less?"

Fel's face twisted as he ignored the barb. "Until those behind the failure of the Ossus Project can be identified and brought to justice. The Alliance is too weak and confused to reach proper judgment. The Empire will carry it out instead, on behalf of all the victims."

A good line for a press release, Kol thought. "I wouldn't hand over our Yuuzhan Vong friends to Keelu. I won't hand them over to you."

"You may change your mind with time. I am prepared to wait. I'm also prepared to cooperate." He let the harsh regal mask slip just a little, showing some of the man Kol had met a few long weeks ago. "If you resist it will only make things difficult for us both. I am not your enemy. I can be the Jedi Order's protector."

"The Jedi will not submit to any government, not even yours."

"Anyone can be made to bow," Roan said, resigned. "Goodbye, Master Skywalker. I hope we can speak again."

The holo disappeared, and the Jedi watched with wordless tension as the Imperial ships fell to join the ones already attacking. It was a large fleet- Kol counted five *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers, six more *Ardent*-class frigates, and a dozen gunships- but the Empire could have fielded much more. He expected Fel was holding more ships in reserve in case the Alliance showed up. He doubted that would be necessary; despite sending out emergency hails, Ossus had received no response from them since the battle began.

"The Mandalorians," Jade whispered, "They're still holding."

"I guess we got what we paid for," Nat said.

The Mandos were tough, resilient fighters, but they had nothing that could match six star destroyers; nothing close. Kol felt a slight tug of hope as he watched Admiral Keelu's star destroyer edge back to the Imperials could take the lead. Strange as it was, he'd rather fight Roan Fel's stormtroopers than a swarm of revenge-crazed irregulars. If Fel could be believed- a bigger *if* than he'd previously thought- it would not even come to that. Ossus would stay under siege but it would end the violence, at least temporarily.

The battle rejoined. The frenzy of lights on the holo-display indicated little of the actual horror going on above their heads. Jedi and Imperials, mercenaries and zealots, were engaged in ferocious brawl, all in the name of a justice none of them could provide. It was a battle without villains and all the more tragic for it. Knowing that made Kol feel sick. He wondered if the true saboteurs of the Ossus Project, whoever they were, had predicted an outcome this grievous. If so, those unseen puppet-masters were as monstrous as the extinct Sith.

"The Mandalorians are still holding," Jade said. "They've blunted that last attack."

"Barely," grunted K'Kruhk, "They will not last many more."

"Look at that." Nat raised a finger and pointed at the holo. "One landing ship got through."

"Imperial?" asked Jade.

He paled. "No."

It took a half-second for that to sink in, with all its awful ramification. Then Kol said, "Alert all Jedi in the temple. Prepare for battle."

The method of deploying ground forces against a stationary target protected by a short-range energy shield dome was considered standard galaxy-wide. The umbrella erected around the Jedi Temple spanned a radius of five kilometers outward from its center point and, like all such

shields, its rim hovered approximately fifteen meters above ground level, or in this case, the tops of the densely-gathered trees that had recently sprung up to cover the planet's once-arid landscape. Standard deployment procedures meant landing craft set down outside the shield's rim and sent out ground forces that slipped beneath the umbrella and marched five kilometers through dense jungle to attack the pyramid.

When the enemy lander slipped through, Kol sent nearly half of the Jedi into the forest with the aim of using traps and Force-tricks to slow the advance. It was not the perfect defense. The temple had no artillery installed because it had never needed them. Still, the Jedi prepared the best they could for a standard ground attack.

They couldn't have anticipated what happened. The landing ship that slipped past the orbital defenders fell to the planet's surface, dropped to absolute minimum altitude, and instead of landing cut a charge straight for the Jedi temple. The drop ship crashed into the forest canopy, kicked in its repulsors, then tore through the treeline and it raced for its target. It just barely skirted the underside of the shield umbrella, in the process tearing up its lower hull in the forest. As it approached the temple it barely decelerated; its mad approach only faltered when the underside repulsors failed, but the madly determined pilots managed to crash-land their ship against the base of the temple's lower pyramid, cracking open both their ship and the ancient stone walls.

And then, too suddenly to prepare, the enemy was among them. Half the Jedi had been sent into the forest, anticipating a fight that never came, and those left behind were wholly unprepared for the attackers suddenly swarming the temple. They were a *mélange* of species- Rodian, Duro, Falleen, humans most of all- wearing miss-matched armor, carrying nonstandard weapons, shouting to each other in a confused frenzy as they charged through the halls. Some shouted demands that the Jedi turn over their Vong. Others just started shooting.

Jade and her sons had to hurry down from the command room in the upper pyramid, and by the time they reached the lower half of the temple the enemy had fanned out to all

corners. The Jedi, despite being caught miserably off-guard, had the Force to help coordinate their response, and they quickly set up choke points at key locations to contain the attackers.

"We've shut down all the lifts leading to the upper half," reported an Omwati Jedi whose name Jade didn't know.

"Very good," Kol said. He was trying to project strength and assurance in the Force but his mother- and hopefully only her- could feel the uncurrent of self-reproach, panic, and most of all fear for his son, stuck in the lower pyramid with the other younglings.

"There's still stairwells on either side of the lift shafts," Nat said. "We've got to defend them."

"I just sent three to the north stairs," said the Omwati.

"We'll take the south. Thank you." Kol gave the younger Jedi a shoulder-squeeze, then hurried to the south stairs. Nat joined him and Jade followed, running as fast as she could to keep up, but by the time they reached the long, spiraling stairwell she was breathless.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Nat asked as Kol bent halfway over the railing and peered down the well.

"I'm fine." She drew breath, drew on the Force. "I'm not decrepit yet."

As soon as she said it sounds echoed up from the bottom of the stairwell. Kol ducked away from the railing just as laserfire shot past. He grasped his lightsaber but didn't ignite it, not yet. From the sound of them, from their distinctive swell of anger in the Force, the attackers were still minutes away.

Those minutes would run down fast. Jade asked, "How many?"

"Two dozen, at least." Kol scowled.

Nat flicked on his golden lightsaber. "We can cut through portions of the stairs. Drop them. That'll stop their advance dead."

"Unless they have fibercables or jetpacks."

"It'll still slow them."

Jade could feel her younger son's indecision. Nat's idea was the best way to keep the attackers from reaching the

upper half of the Temple, but it did nothing to help Kol reach his son.

"We have to deal with the problem in front of us," Jade said. "There aren't enough Jedi to fight them off here."

"I know." With a scowl, Kol switched on his blade. "Can you keep them distracted?"

Jade nodded. "Let's get to work," Nat said.

The enemy was getting closer, rushing up the spiral stairs as quickly as a disorganized mob could. Jade stepped away from the railing, pressed her back against the shaft's curved outer wall, and closed her eyes. She felt all those angry minds, united only by their determination to do harm to the people they thought had wronged them. They knew next to nothing about the Jedi Order, or the design of the temple they were storming. They only wanted justice, or revenge; two words for the same thing. Jade felt those minds- vicious but pliable- and knew what to do.

Jade Skywalker had never been a fighter. She could use her lightsaber to battle and to kill; she had used it to do so more often than she'd liked. Her first teacher, a Bimm named Revli Mjalu, had refused to carry a lightsaber at all. Despite her diminutive size and innate gentleness, Master Mjalu had battled a powerful Sith to a standstill and nearly killed her, in the process allowing Jade and her friends to escape. Mjalu had set the example Jade always tried to live up to.

She was a Skywalker, daughter of Ben, granddaughter of Luke, great-granddaughter of the Chosen One who'd been conceived by his own midi-chlorians. She had an immense reservoir of Force-power on which to draw. She pulled on it now- easily, effortlessly, with seven decades' worth of practice- and took hold of those two-dozen angry minds. She took their anger and paranoid and swung it in a different direction, literally pulling their attention behind them and feeding them conjured images of Yuuzhan Vong charging up the stairs, amphistaffs swinging.

Laserfire resounded on the lower levels of the well while Nat and Kol got to work. The older brother stabbed his lightsaber into the place where curving wall met descending stairs, then walked downward, along the curve, until he'd

made one full circle. Kol cut one neat line at the start of the circle, severing metal stairs from duracrete landing. Nat, one level down, cut the stairs on the other end.

The hideous scream of twisting metal finally broke the attackers' attention away from Jade's conjured delusions. They looked upward just as the chunk of spiraling stairs fell down, smashing into the ring below with a hideous crunch. By that time Nat had already sprung. Kol and Jade called on the Force to pull him upward, through a sudden blaze of laserfire from below, then set him down on the landing with his mother and brother.

The attackers kept firing, but there was little they could do now. Some attempted to climb over the rubble of the crashed stairs but others held back, afraid the weight might send more chunks crashing down. Unless they'd brought jetpacks or fiberchord, there was no way they could reach the three Jedi on the landing. Jade felt frustration and confusion from them and was satisfied.

She could feel Kol's thoughts too. They'd fast veered away from this problem and onto the one he really cared about: his son. With the stairways blocked and the lifts shut down, he was calculating ways to reach the younglings in the lower pyramid. A climb down the exterior, perhaps, or a jump down a lift shaft.

Jade put a hand on her son's arm and said, "We'll handle the rest. Go help Cade."

When he'd returned from Zonama Sekot a part of Khat Lah had been expecting this, even hoping for it. He was a warrior of the Yuuzhan Vong, sworn by his vows to the Ganner to honor the Jedi Knights and defend them against their enemies. The enigmatic conversation with Sekot, assuming it had not been a dream, had left him confused and directionless. Now, in combat, there was simplicity and purpose.

Besh Lah and Vua Yaght were with him. The three warriors stood guard outside the underground chamber where the Jedi younglings, including Eli Horn, were kept. One master, the squat furry Tili Qua, remained inside, apparently using his

Force magic to calm the panicked children. For defense, there was only the Yuuzhan Vong.

The Jedi had shut down all lift transports but the level with the children could be accessed from two auxiliary stairwells. Besh Lah went off to guard the east stair and Vua Yaght the west. Khat Lah ranged in the halls, tracking the noise of fighting in levels above. Through the ceiling he heard pounding feet, laserfire, and the dimmed hum of lightsabers, but it was difficult to tell how many beings were moving above him. Despite the confusion he felt confident, even happy. His senses were on full alert, adrenaline hummed in his body. When fighting came he'd be ready, and he'd fight well.

He heard attackers heading for the west stairs and a shout from Vua Yaght sent him sprinting to assist. He reached the other warrior's side just as an explosive blast pushed the locked doors open and sent smoke spilling into the hall. Vua Yaght already had an explosive thud bug in hand, arm cocked. He hurled it into the smoke as Khat Lah grabbed one from his own bandolier and threw it.

They saw two flashes of light in the billowing black, then got their response: a hail of laserfire. Vua Yaght's vonduun armor caught the first volley, but the impact staggered the warrior before he could charge. Khat Lah ducked low, beneath a second spray of lasers, and with a barked command ordered the amphistaff coiled around his forearm to uncoil. Its long razor-tipped tail extended a half-meter past Khat Lah's fist, and he swung it as an extension of his arm. The smoke was starting to clear as he spiraled among his enemies, cutting one human across the throat and stabbing a Rodian in the thigh. At the same time he snapped an armored elbow into the face of the human behind him and used his free fist to punch another human in the gut. Every strike was instinctive, every motion effortless. He dropped an enemy with every blow.

The attackers panicked. None of them had seen a Yuuzhan Vong warrior in anything except nightmares. They spun on him and opened fire, most of their shots taking down each other as he let his legs fall out beneath him. Khat Lah

dropped and lashed out with his amphistaff again, cracking through two sets of legs. He reared back to his feet just as several laser blasts impacted on his armored back, pitting the vonduun shell and knocking him off balance. Another impact- a hard boot- slammed into his back and pitched him face-down onto the body-strewn floor.

"You karking monster!" he heard someone shout, only to be cut off by a gagging noise.

Khat Lah pushed himself off the ground and scrambled to his feet. The space around the broken doors was littered with bodies, all on the ground except his own, Vua Yaght's, and the purple-faced human grasping vainly as the amphistaff coiled around his neck.

"Wait," Khat Lah panted, "Disable him. Do not kill."

"He tried to kill you!" Vua Yaght hissed.

"The Jedi say not to kill... Unless we have to."

Vua Yaght looked at the surrounding bodies. Some would never rise again, and some by Khat Lah's hand, but in the heat of battle some deaths were inevitable.

Vua Yaght gave a very human-like shrug, loosened his coiled staff enough for the human to pass out, then lowered the body to the ground without breaking its throat. As mercies went, it was all Vua Yaght was in the mood for. He quickly began smashing all the infidel blasters. Khat Lah was about to join in when he heard another explosion from the direction of the younglings' chamber.

"Besh Lah?" Vua Yaght called for his comrade but got no response.

The two warriors sprinted back to the chamber, just in time to see the backs of eight armored Falleen commandos plunging through the broken doors.

Vua Yaght was ready to plunge straight in, but Khat Lah pulled him back by his armored collar. They watched as the Falleen marched into the chamber, weapons raised at the mass of younglings cowering against the far wall. Master Tili Qua, no larger than the children, tried to put his furry body between the apprentices and the attackers.

"How *dare* you," the Chandra-Fan chirped. "These are children. They're no danger to you."

"We won't hurt them unless we have to." The lead Falleen glanced over his shoulder. "Call the boss. Tell him we've got the kids."

As his assistant got out his comlink, the leader looked back to Tili Qua. "Nothing's going to happen to the children if you hand over the Vong."

"The Yuuzhan Vong are not your enemies."

"And you wonder why half the galaxy hates you." Khat Lah could hear the contempt in the Falleen's voice. "All your nobility just makes you *accomplices* to those freaks. Do you know what they did to our world?"

They were angry, distracted. "Let's go," Khat Lah whispered.

Together, he and Vua Yaght charged fast and silent. The children in the back- watching the Falleen, watching the door- went wide-eyed and gave them away. Khat Lah smacked the first Falleen in the face with an amphistaff, then kicked him hard enough to crack ribs and drop him. Vua Yaght took out another while Tili Qua, lightsaber suddenly blazing in his hand, jumped into the air faster than possible for the short-legged, furry creature. With the Force as his aid he cut through the lead Falleen's blaster, then bounded to his assistant and knocked him to the ground.

Khat Lah took out a second Falleen and Vua Yaght his third. The sound of lasers filled the chamber as the last standing Falleen sprayed indiscriminate fire at the children. It went over the smallest one's heads but Khat Lah saw a hammer-headed Ithorian drop. A trio of lightsabers sprung to life, deflecting a few more shots. These came from some of the older padawans: a blue-skinned Twi'lek, a red-haired human girl, a boy with messy blond curls Khat Lah recognized as the son of the Jedi leader. They looked terrified but they interposed themselves between the other children at the Falleen, both the one on his feet and the commando leader, who'd sprung up on his knees and grabbed a hidden pistol.

Tili Qua, separated from the younglings in the fight, looked to the Yuuzhan Vong. In the tense silence he tilted his head toward the standing Falleen, designating a target. Khat Lah nodded. Then an invisible hand wrenched the pistol from the

leader's hands. The other Falleen fired again at the younglings, but the three in front caught the blasts. Vua Yaght got to him first. Sparing nothing, he stabbed the razor-tip of his amphistaff deep into the Falleen's guts. The commando released a gurgling noise as his legs gave out and he collapsed to the floor in an expanding pool of green blood.

For a long moment, silence reigned in the chamber; silence and the horrified looks from the children. Khat Lah searched all those faces for the one he cared about. He found it in the back corner: Eli Horn, staring at him with shock, recognition, and- he thought, he hoped- awe and gratitude.

A tinny voice sounded from a comlink left abandoned on the floor. It said: "Zeevid, are you there? What happened? Hold on, we're sending reinforcements!"

Khat Lah crushed the metal cylinder under his heel. He looked at Eli Horn, then Tili Qua, and told the little master, "They will be coming soon."

The Chandra-Fan gestured to the door. "We have no barricade. And no place to run."

Khat Lah told his comrade, "Find Besh Lah. If he's alive, get him back here. Hurry." Vua Yaght darted off without a word. The warrior looked back at the Jedi Master, at the frightened adolescents bravely gripping their lightsabers, at the terrified children, at Eli Horn.

And deep down, Khat Lah knew there was no place he'd rather be, nothing he'd rather do than stand in defense of these children. He felt like he was completing the fate he'd devoted himself to; more, like he was finally redeeming his failure at Duro.

"We will honor our debts." Khat Lah grasped his amphistaff in both hands. "None shall pass."

Pressured on all sides, the defense of Ossus gradually descended into the planet's upper atmosphere. In blue-white skies, above an emerald curve, Jedi and Mandalorian starfighters fought an increasingly frantic battle against every Imperial shuttle and landing craft trying for the Temple.

It was a strain to keep up the battle-meld, even for Lowbacca. There were too many targets to chase, too few

Jedi to handle them all. They'd lost ten starfighters so far, almost a third of the Temple's complement, and only half the pilots had been able to eject. The TIE Predators were merciless and seemed to multiply every second, while the Mandalorian Beskads grew increasingly scarce.

It was the only way it could be. Against a full Imperial battle group, nothing the Jedi had could matter.

Lowbacca knew this, and he knew that a ship full of rogue commandos had already dropped down to the planet. No one responded to his attempts to hail the Jedi temple, and when he reached down with the Force he only sensed desperation and conflict. In the short moments when he wasn't chasing or being chased, he wondered whether it wouldn't be better to just give in, to order the Mandos to stand down and to let the Imperials land.

Roan Fel had promised to interdict the Jedi but not send in troops. He'd also promised to restrain the irregulars he'd allied with.

But even that was just a choice between a slow death or a fast one. Lowbacca felt despair well inside him, deeper than when he'd lost his daughter to Abeloth, deeper than anything he'd felt since the darkest days of the first Yuuzhan Vong War. The only mercy of this new war was that it would be over quickly.

Even as he fought despair, Lowbacca fought the Imperials. His Twintail dropped down on one TIE Predator and blasted the thing out of the sky, then formed up on the back of Wolf Sazen's fighter. He sent the young Zabrak a quick query in the Force, and Sazen confirmed his ship was undamaged.

A voice, the first he'd heard in a while, came over this headset. "All Jedi, we have new contacts!" That was Master Qemar, still flying somewhere in this tangled mess.

"What is it *now*?" Sazen sounded more exhausted than afraid.

"I'm seeing.... heavy cruisers... Mon Cal ships."

"The Alliance?"

Lowbacca hardly dared hope, but he watched as sets of TIE Predators swooped upward, away from the planet, toward the starships invisible in orbit.

A less-familiar voice came on his headset. The comm officer of the Mandalorian flagship said, "We just got a hail from the Alliance flagship. Some *jetii* called Arlen Fel sends his regards."

Lowbacca heard a triumphant roar from his son Karrash-chakuk but sent a warning through the battle-meld. This fight wasn't over yet.

When the Alliance ships appeared over Ossus, the first thing Roan Fel felt was relief. Then knowledge replaced instinct; what was now a brief, messy skirmish stood on the precipice of full war.

"Incoming transmission from *Resolute*," Veed reported with barely-restrained glee. "It's a relay from the Alliance flagship. They're asking for you, Majesty."

Roan gave small thanks that the Alliance commander wanted to speak to him personally. Admiral Fenel was a fierce fighter, but he had the diplomatic skills of a Mantellian savrip. "Put him on, then."

Beneath the tactical holo relayed from *Resolute*, a smaller image appeared, showing the heads and shoulders of two figures. Roan recognized them immediately: The Quarren with mouth-tentacles dangling over the collar of his admiral's uniform could only be Lekhwash. That the Alliance had sent its supreme commander to personally oversee this fight belied their seriousness.

The other face belonged to Roan's uncle, and it was Arlen who spoke first. "Hello, Your Majesty."

There was deliberate coolness in his voice, and a hint of hurt. Roan couldn't blame him for feeling betrayed; he wanted to explain that had happened to his uncle, to Kol Skywalker and all the other Jedi, but he couldn't do that here.

An emperor had pride. An emperor commanded. An emperor did not back down, especially in front of the moffs who'd forced him into this.

"The Empire is in the process of establishing a secure perimeter around the Jedi Temple." Roan said. "We are fulfilling our obligation as signatories of the Anaxes Treaty. You have no legal right to intervene."

“As partners to the Jedi in the Ossus Project, we have every right,” Lekhwash said. “Stand down. Order your ships to pull back. Any forces you have on the ground must be withdrawn.”

Roan’s eyes darted up to the tactical holo. Despite fierce opposition from the Jedi and their unlikely Mandalorian helpers, a half-dozen Imperial drop ships had made it to the surface and started deploying walkers and landspeeders at the edge of the shield perimeter. The real issue, however, was the one mad drop-ship that had slipped under the shields and literally smashed into the Temple. They answered to Admiral Keelu if they answered to anyone, and he knew the Rodian would be unwilling to withdraw.

Veed didn’t need the Force to read Roan’s thoughts. “We can’t turn back on our allies,” he grumbled, “Not after we’ve come this far.”

But Elliah was on his other shoulder. “We still have a tactical advantage,” his wife whispered. “Use it to force negotiations.”

He swallowed. To Lekhwash and Arlen he said, “The Empire will not abandon its allies.”

“And the Alliance will not abandon ours,” said Lekhwash.

Roan’s mind raced for some way out of this impasse, but it ran in hopeless circles with no way out. He was legally bound to stand with Keelu and her undisciplined, vengeance-hungry militias. To abandon them would be to shame the Empire; to shame himself even more than he’d already been shamed.

“Look.” Seniac said quietly, and pointed to the tactical holo.

Admiral Fenel had ordered Keelu’s ships to outer orbit so the Imperials could engage the Mandalorian defenders directly. Now those same ships lay between Fenel and Lekhwash, and just as Roan had feared, they’d begun opening fire on the nearest Alliance vessels.

“One moment, sirs.” Roan said with all the restraint he could muster. He stabbed his controls, suspending the communication, and snapped, “Get me Keelu! Now!”

A few long seconds later, the Rodian’s face appeared where Lekhwash’s had been. “What are you waiting for?”

Keelu's snout twitched. "We are attacking the enemy! Help us!"

"Mind your tone!" Roan could barely restrain himself from shouting. "I am your emperor and I can feed you to the neks if I choose!"

"We expected an emperor to honor his promise!" Keelu snapped. "Instead all you've done is sideline us! We want *justice*!"

"The Alliance is not your enemy. Stop attacking now!"

"The Alliance stands with the Jedi and the Jedi stand with the Vong. An attack on one is an attack on all. That *is* what the Anaxes Treaty means, Emperor."

"Admiral Fenel is requesting orders," Elliah whispered.

The situation was rapidly falling out of Roan's control. He knew it, he watched it tumble step by step. He was the Emperor Fel, heir to his illustrious father and grandfather. He should have been able to stop this.

And then his choice was made for him. Two more Alliance task forces, as massive as the first, decanted from hyperspace at the same time, both on flanking vectors toward the Imperials and their allies.

There was no victory over a fleet like that. The only options were surrender or fighting retreat.

In surrendering, the Empire would be delivered its greatest humiliation in a hundred years. To fight would salvage its dignity but spread the fire at Ossus across the stars.

Admiral Keelu's face still hovered beneath the tactical holo, but she'd gone silent in shock. To her Roan said, "Withdraw your people from the surface if you can." To Veed he barked, "Pull up our drop teams! Now!"

The admiral didn't hesitate to comply. Keelu stuttered, "W-We will not surrender, Majesty! We cannot! We made a vow, together! Justice for our worlds! Justice against the Vong!"

Roan knew that. And he knew that Keelu thought she was fighting the good fight to gain recompense she deserved for historic wrongs. No one but a true believer could cause so much trouble.

"You will have justice," Roan rasped. "But not today. Stand by for orders from Admiral Fenel."

He tapped a button and killed the transmission. To Veed he said, "Tell *Resolute* to get out of there. Find a weak spot in their formation before they tighten it and punch out. How are our ground troops?"

Veed shook his head. "They need time to load their people and equipment back in the drop ships."

"They don't have it. Tell Fenel with withdrawal immediately. And make sure Admiral Keelu's ships are protected."

He waited for Veed to relay the order, waited for Fenel to begin his push out of Ossus' orbit. From the tactical holo, Roan saw that the Alliance had brought several interdicator cruisers with them, but as yet they hadn't raised their gravity wells. He prayed Lekhwash was offering him a mercy.

He tapped the control panel one more time and brought up the Quarren and his uncle. "My ships are withdrawing. Do not try to stop them and they will not engage you."

"Those who attacked the Jedi Temple will be held responsible." Lekhwash's tentacles twitched.

"The *real* ones responsible are the ones who ruined a hundred worlds." Roan let anger into his voice. "Have the Jedi or the Alliance found them? No. If you sit on your hands and refuse to solve a problem, don't blame the people who actually try."

"This is solving *nothing*," Arlen insisted. "You *know* that."

"Don't tell me what I know."

"Do you really think your father would have started a war with the Alliance?"

Roan's eyes darted up to the tactical display. Fenel's ships were pushing ahead, but Alliance vessels were gnawing at his flanks. They weren't trapping him here but they weren't letting him go without a fight.

Roan told his uncle, "This is not a war of my choosing."

"We did not choose this either," Lekhwash said.

"Then we have chosen this together, all of us." As it snapped off his tongue the truth of it settled on Roan like a heavy burden; it seemed to weigh down Lekhwash and Arlen too. "We have said enough. Good day, gentlemen."

He turned off the connection. They did not try to hail him again. Veed muttered reports as the rest of the battle played

out, and no one else added a thing. Fenel and Keelu's ships began slipping away into hyperspace. None of the troops on the ground made it off Ossus; the Mandalorians swooped down and seized them as prisoners. As the last Imperial ships jumped out of the system, they registered a short burst of uncoded transmissions between the Alliance flagship and the Jedi Temple. They amounted to: ALL CLEAR and THANK YOU. Strangely, a tiny smile creased Moff Calixte's lips.

Roan should have been relieved; instead he felt nothing but anger. He spun and stalked out of the chamber without a word to his moffs. Only Elliah followed him into the hallway beyond.

"You need to contact Coruscant right away," his wife told him. "Talk to the triumvirate. You can still force a negotiation."

"With what? We were defeated, totally."

"Almost a hundred worlds still defected to us from the Alliance. Hundreds more worlds- Alliance worlds- are refusing to follow Coruscant. The Alliance had a bigger fleet today but they're weakened."

"And they still have three times our planets, our ships, our resources." Roan's hands curled into fists; he yearned for something to punch. "We cannot win a war against the Alliance but that is *exactly* what Veed threw us into. Veed and Keelu and Geist and whoever else has been playing us, playing *me* from the start."

"All the more reason to talk to the triumvirs. Explain that this situation is not full in your control."

He looked at his wife in shock. "Elliah, we are on the brink of *war*. You can be sure the Alliance has its hawks who want an excuse to break us. We can't afford any hint of weakness."

"But we *are* weak, you said it yourself. That's why we have to try and deescalate now."

"By turning our backs on our allies."

"Allies like Keelu are worse than enemies."

"I know that, but she isn't wrong, damn her. Hundreds of worlds, billions of galaxies, are crying out for justice. Someone *should* stand for them. If the Jedi and Alliance

refuse to, why shouldn't we? Veed- damn him too- isn't wrong. This is a time for the Empire to make its name and stand for justice. This cannot become our humiliation."

Elliah regarded him carefully, as if she were judging a stranger. "What humiliation are you most afraid of? The Empire, or yours personally?"

He was appalled at her suggestion. Normally he trusted his wife's measured judgement, her outsider perspective, but now she couldn't have been more wrong.

"This is not about my pride. My father and grandfather wanted an Empire that was *strong*- politically, militarily, and *morally*. I will not let their dream fail on my watch." He lifted his head. "It was not our choice, but it has been made. We are committed."

Chapter Ten

Once the Alliance task force secured position over Ossus, a landing party of soldiers, engineers, and emergency medical personnel were dispatched to the temple. With their assistance the remaining scraps of the enemy raiding party were cornered and captured, and the Jedi could take stock of their losses.

Damage to the temple itself was significant, but limited to only a few areas. Most of the temple remained untouched by the raiders. Some two dozen Jedi were wounded in the fighting and required aid. Many more suffered minor injuries. The dead amounted to eleven knights and four apprentices, including a single youngling.

That it could have been much worse gave Kol Skywalker no comfort. It had been his choice to make a stand here against an attack he knew was coming. Though other masters were already assuring him otherwise, those fifteen had died because of his decision. Evacuating the temple, fleeing before their enemies, would have not just been an admission of defeat, but a willing plunge into dark times the Jedi hadn't known for a hundred years.

He was still on the brink, and what lay past it seemed darker than ever.

Kol knew the Alliance triumvirate wanted to speak to him. Admiral Lekhwash insisted he make contact as soon as possible. He delayed for as long as he could, finding several hours' worth of excuses, checking on the wounded, examining the temple's exterior damage, listening to battle

reports from the mercenaries who seemed eager to haul it back to Mandalore. He checked on his family members and spent a good half hour with Cade, who had performed well when the younglings came under attack and tried very hard not to show much how he'd been rattled. It was his mother who'd insisted, in that quiet firm way of hers, that he do what had to be done.

So Kol stood in the Temple's most secure communications room, alone, facing off against the holographic images of Bail Antilles, Gial Gahan, and Nu Toreena.

"Military action at Ossus was authorized by executive order of the triumvirate," Gahan explained. "Our legal authority extends only to limited and emergency actions. We do not have the power to declare war."

"I sincerely hope a war does not come," Kol said. "Have you made any overtures to the Empire?"

Gahan nodded. "As of yet, we've had no response."

"I don't expect the Empire to sue for peace," Toreena said. "It would be a reversal of their unexpectedly aggressive behavior."

Unexpectedly aggressive was a good word for it. Roan Fel's betrayal, if that's what it was, stung harshly. They were only distant cousins and had never been personally close, but when Fel had given his private assurance that he'd keep the Empire out of this mess, Kol had accepted his word as honorable.

"If the Empire is going to be aggressive, we must be prepared to meet that aggression," said Toreena. "It's also within the triumvirate's authority to move fleets to full alert. We'll be reinforcing our territories that border the Empire."

Kol looked to the other two triumvirs. "An actual strike requires senate approval, yes?"

"Assuming a quorum can be found," Antilles said tiredly. "After the battle, seventy-eight Alliance members petitioned the Empire to accept them. Over one hundred more systems are threatening to withdraw or have refused sending military aid."

Grave as those numbers sounded, the Alliance counted thousands of systems as members. As long as major Core

worlds stayed loyal to Coruscant, the Alliance would still have a vast industrial and economic advantage on the Empire. That fact was plain to everyone to see; it made it all more unbelievable that Roan Fel's empire had taken this war-mongering path.

"The Jedi will do everything we can to support the Alliance, whatever lays ahead," Kol told them.

"Indeed?" Toreena tipped her hammer-shaped head.

"The entire Order in your debt. We will work as negotiators. We will run messages and supplies, act as scouts, gather intelligence."

"And when it comes to war, will you join our soldiers on the front lines?"

The suggestion took Kol aback, but when he looked at Antilles and Gahan, they showed no surprise. The human triumvir said, "Roan Fel has his Imperial Knights. We need something to match them. Our ordinary soldiers cannot."

Kol wanted to say that Fel would never allow his Knights to fight Jedi, but he couldn't. He didn't know what Fel would do anymore.

"When war comes, we will have to act decisively," Toreena said. "With the Jedi's help, the Alliance can smash the Empire's upstarts and end this war in a few months. We can send them sulking back to Bastion with less territory than when all this mess started- but *only* if the Jedi do their duty."

Kol struggled to keep the scowl off his face. Toreena had always been the triumvir most reluctant to endorse the Ossus Project, and its failure had done nothing to endear the Jedi to her. For Toreena, this was a chance to knock down a rival that had been steadily gaining strength and systems for thirty years. Ithorians were supposed to be peaceful, but there were exceptions to every rule.

Toreena's stance was clear; Kol looked to the others. "The Jedi are keepers of the peace. Not soldiers."

"Many Jedi fought on the front lines against the Vong a century ago," Antilles pointed out. "Including your great-grandfather."

"I'm aware, but that was a fight for survival. This..." He couldn't bring himself to say what he felt: that this was a crass war, a manufactured crisis where hawks in both the Alliance and Empire had jumped on an excuse to start a conflict they'd both been itching for. Instead he said, "In the Clone Wars, the Jedi allowed themselves to become generals in a galaxy-wide war. That war, from its inception, was an elaborate plot to destroy the Jedi. Militarily, physically, *morally*. It succeeded and the galaxy suffered for decades because of it."

"Are you suggesting another dark conspiracy is behind *this* war?" Gahan sounded truly curious.

"I don't know." Kol's hands turned to fists. "Things do not make sense. We still don't know who sabotaged the Ossus Project, and the Empire's actions do not match with the Roan Fel I've known."

"Our intelligence suggests he attempted to veto the war, but was overruled by the Moff Council," Antilles put in.

Interesting, and enough to give Kol a spark of hope, but only a small one. He'd spoken with Roan Fel just hours ago and that had not been a man looking for peace.

"If you feel outflanked, it is all the more reason to act boldly," said Toreena. "War *is* coming, Master Skywalker, a war in large part *about* the Jedi. Would you hide behind the front lines while thousands of Alliance soldiers die to protect you? I'd not thought the Jedi cowards."

Even if her motives were transparent, her words stung. Truth did that. "I cannot make such an important decision right now."

"You need to make it soon," warned Antilles.

"I will. And I will consult with the rest of the Jedi Council."

"Can you decide in two days?"

Kol looked at the triumvirs: three faces, stern and expectant, devoid of sympathy. "Two days." He swallowed. "You'll have your answer."

"I didn't expect the Mandalorians to come through for us, but they did," Nat Skywalker said. His holo-image was the

same blue-white as the flash of hyperspace that strobed constantly around *Runaround's* cramped cabin. Marin Solo had spent far more time than she'd expected in this little shuttle and she was looking forward to being back on spacious *Fast Start* with her family.

"I just talked to my mother," she told her cousin. "She says that the Alliance has sent feelers out to the *Mand'alor*."

That didn't please the Jedi. "If Coruscant needs Mandos for help, that doesn't say good things about its defense force."

Marin nodded gravely. On the long ride back home she'd had plenty of alone time to view the news reports. Since the battle at Ossus, more and more worlds were either siding with the Empire or declaring neutrality.

"The Alliance has requested the Jedi fight too," Nat said gravely. "My brother's trying to decide how to respond."

Marin didn't like the sound of that. The toll of taking some lives and failing to save others had driven her from the Order. Still, she tried a weak smile. "Still got my lightsaber?"

Nat nodded and smiled back, also weak. When she'd left the Order she'd passed her gold-bladed weapon down to her then-apprentice cousin. A lot had changed since then; Nat was about ten kilos heavier, with a graying beard to join his long sand-colored hair. Gravity had settled in his eyes too; she couldn't see anything of the young apprentice in them.

"One bit of good news," he said. "I think I know a planet where we can make a redoubt. A hidden temple, in case things really go bad."

"That's great news."

"It's a place I found a long time ago. Zhar system. There's a strange blurring in the Force there, I don't know how or why, but it would hide the presence of a lot of Jedi. Atmosphere's really thin, but we could work on that."

"Good thing the Jedi still have credits to work with."

"*You* still have credits."

"Me and the Calrissians. And Volgma. We're co-managing those accounts. Chance says he knows how to spend that money quietly when the time comes."

"It's a lot of trust to be putting in non-Jedi."

"Chance is my dad's oldest friend. He's already helped the Jedi more ways than I can count. Chereth's already done a lot for us, too."

"And the Hutt?"

"Chance and Chereth trust him." Marin shrugged. "He promised to make the Jedi accounts magically grow with a little legally-questionably insider trading. And it's worked."

"Bet he put it all into defense stocks."

"Mostly," Marin said grimly. "They're expecting lots of business."

"Are you heading back to your ship now?" asked Nat.

"Going back home," she nodded. "Keep me informed about your hidden temple, or whatever it's going to be. I'll do all I can to help." His expression went thoughtful at that last phrase. She hurried to correct herself. "I'll do what I can quietly, behind the scenes. I'm not picking up my lightsaber again."

"Good. I don't have a spare." Nat tried false humor.

"If Kol decided the Jedi should fight on the front lines... Will you fight?"

Nat sighed wearily. "If I don't, it would be a blow. To him, personally."

"You don't have to be defined by your family name." It had been a hard lesson for Marin to learn.

"Maybe," Nat grunted. "Time will tell. Anything else for now?"

"No. I just wanted to drop you a line. Give you an update and see how you were doing."

"Doing as well as anyone. We could have lost a lot more Jedi." He didn't have to add they might lose many more yet.

"Any new leads on what started this *osik*?"

"We still don't know why the terraforming all went bad. The Vong shapers are looking into it, but..." He shook his head. "Not my area. Sorry."

"I know. Not mine either." Marin let her hand hover over the comm controls. "See you around, Nat."

"See you." He killed the connected before she did.

After that Marin settled in for the last few hours of her homeward trip. She'd already talked to her mother and the

Calrissians, her father and Nat. Those were the only Jedi she'd talked to in decades. When *Runaround* finally dropped out of hyperspace the familiar bulk of *Fast Start* was waiting for her. Its bright open landing bay looked like a warm embrace.

When she set the shuttle down Benet and Ania were there. She embraced her husband first, then her daughter.

"You were gone so long, Mom, I was getting worried," the little girl said.

Marin mussed her black hair. "Just had to go on a side trip. Don't worry about it. I'm not going anywhere for a while."

"You mean you won't be going on any long trips by yourself?"

Marin could feel Benet's expectant gaze without seeing it. "Maybe later. But not now."

Ania seemed satisfied with that. Marin stood straight and finally caught the questions in her husband's eyes. Softly she said, "You *were* the one encouraging me to... get involved."

He took her hand and said nothing. There would be time for questions later, many of them, but not in front of Ania. For now, when there were three of them, they could be only a family and Marin could be only a Solo, not a Fel or Skirata, Jedi or Mando. With her free hand she reached down and grabbed Ania's.

"Come on, let's get back to our normal lives," she said, and hoped against hope it would last.

"Nothing will be the same after this," his mother said, and Roan Fel knew it was true.

They sat in one of the meditation rooms inside the Academy. The stark simplicity of its white walls and grey floor jarred against all the clamor in his head.

"There's not going back either," Marasiah continued. "Which means all you can do is press ahead."

"Like father?" Roan asked.

She nodded. "He didn't *want* to declare himself emperor, or force the Imperial Knights to secede from the Jedi. Situations evolved where those became his best options. When the time came to make those hard choices, your father

didn't back down or look away. He did what was necessary to preserve the Empire."

"The Moff Council's recklessness may destroy it."

"I know. It's up to you, as your father's son, to make sure that doesn't happen."

It was nothing Roan didn't already know. He'd worn this crown since he was seventeen years old. The days when he'd been a mere prince, his father and brother still alive, usually felt as foreign as another man's life. It was really in these quiet moments, when he sat down with his mother, that he remembered what he used to be.

"Father knew that to be strong you must appear strong. And I will. Even if the numbers are stacked against us, we can still turn this war to the Empire's advantage." It was what the moffs had been telling him, and he didn't fully believe it. "I've said I don't want to bring the Imperial Knights into this war. I stand by that. They'll still be working with me, behind the scenes, seeking the true authors of this war."

He watched his mother carefully, awaiting her response. Marasiah had been a Jedi once, and she'd urged him to speak with Kol Skywalker before the war broke out. Yet she was also a hard woman, used to making hard judgments. If she didn't approve of his choice he'd end up doubting himself.

But in the end she nodded. "I think that's the right decision, for now. The Jedi won't trust us, and you shouldn't necessarily trust them. But build a bridge and keep it secret"

"Especially from the moffs."

"From *everyone*, Roan." She laid a frail hand on his. "Until I met your father I didn't know what the Force was. I thought the Jedi were baby-snatching cultists with fake magic. But I now know that the Force is more than real. It moves behind everything, directing history. It moves through everyone, even people who can never feel it themselves, like your father. It's moving now, and however this war ends it won't be decided by politicians, moffs or admirals, but by the Force."

"Then I'll have to listen carefully," Roan said. "But right now, Mother, I'm not sure what the Force is saying."

“Neither do I,” Marasiah admitted. “Which is why we need to keep talking with the Jedi. Together, hopefully, we can hear what we can’t hear alone.

“This was never a choice I thought I’d have to make,” Kol Skywalker said. “Before I did, I wanted to get your opinions. Your experiences are more valuable than anyone else’s.”

The young human sat like an old man, hunched forward as he sat in the quiet meditation chamber inside the Temple, weighted by his awful responsibilities. Arrayed before him were the Jedi Order’s three most aged knights. At a mere one-hundred and twenty years old, Lowbacca often felt like a youth to Masters K’Kruhk and Tr’a Saa, who had survived the Clone Wars, watched the old Jedi Order’s brutal death and a new one’s resurrection. Kol Skywalker looked to them now as though expecting ancient wisdom and he could feel, very faintly in the Force, a flush of embarrassment from Tr’a Saa.

“The Alliance has justification to make their request,” the Neti equivocated. “Of course, they don’t understand the Jedi’s point of view. War brings dangers unique to Force-users.”

“There are many such dangers.” K’Kruhk breathed heavily. “During the Clone Wars, I led troops into battle. Countless clone soldiers died on my orders and it appalled me. For a time I refused to fight, and even sought out other Jedi to oppose the war, thinking we might make a united protest...” He shook his shaggy head. “But that was just a ploy by Count Dooku. By the Sith.”

“The whole war was a ploy by the Sith,” Kol said. “A Jedi trap.”

“And now you fear you step into another,” Tr’a Saa said softly.

“Yes. And even if it’s not a trap, Jedi are peacekeepers. By becoming soldiers we pervert ourselves.” Kol looked at the Whiphid and the Neti. “That is what you’ve always told me, from experience.”

K’Kruhk sighed again. “That is a serious danger. I knew some knights who were drawn deeply toward the dark during

the Clone Wars. Yet others shined more brightly than ever before.”

“Violence is not inherently of the Dark Side,” Tr’a Saa said. “But for Jedi who have not learned to control their passion, it can become a gateway. And for those who remain purely in the light, it can drain them even as they do great good.”

Kol thought on that, then looked to Lowbacca. “You’ve been quiet, Master. What do you have to say?”

In low murmurs and growls, the Wookiee did his best to explain that his war- that is to say, the Yuuzhan Vong War in which his generation of Jedi had come of age- had been different from the Clone Wars. Luke Skywalker had initially been hesitant to let the Jedi engage directly against the invaders, both because he did not understand their place in the Force and because he was afraid his students might fall to the dark. As the Jedi’s understanding of their enemy grew, Kol’s great-grandfather had also relinquished the subtle pride behind his keeping the Jedi restrained.

The Jedi had seen terrible things in the Yuuzhan Vong War. Lowbacca stressed that; even now, a century later, his dreams were afflicted by old horrors. Yet the Jedi had been instrumental both in turning the war’s tide and in ending it not with genocide but with a peace- however awkward- between the peoples of two separate galaxies. The Jedi had been right to fight in his war, and the galaxy would be a darker place if they had not.

Sometimes drastic action was required. Thirty years ago, as head of the Jedi Council, Lowbacca had decided to attack the hidden Sith base on Shedu Maad with every saber the Jedi could manage. It had been a risk in more ways than one- risk of a trap, risk that some Jedi might be mentally and physically traumatized by their fight. Some Jedi were killed in that fierce battle, and many more bore visible and invisible scars. Yet their strike had eliminated the Sith and freed the galaxy from their looming shadow. Thirty years on, Lowbacca did not regret his choice to fight.

He told Kol this, and the human wilted even more. He’d come here looking for the answers he needed; instead he received only conflicting opinions.

"This conflict is not the Yuuzhan Vong War, nor the Clone Wars," Tr'a Saa said. "Perhaps the biggest difference is that it is *about* the Jedi in away the others were not. Our choices and their unforeseen consequences brought about this conflict."

Lowbacca roared reproach. The Jedi were not to blame.

"I did not say it is our *fault*." The Neti shook her head. "But it is our responsibility to resolve this."

"You mean to say we cannot limit ourselves to scouting and supply runs," Kol said, voice dry.

K'Kruhk shook his head. "This is too familiar. Too much moves unseen. Who sabotaged the Ossus Project? Why has the Empire turned bellicose? Until we have good answers to those questions, I fear another trap."

Lowbacca said that he understood those fears, but if the Jedi did not go to the front lines of a war widely seen as fought on their behalf, it would paint them as cowards and ruin the reputation of the Order.

Kol surprised them by laughing; a dry, bitter laughter. "And I thought we had no reputation left to ruin."

Tr'a Saa frowned. "If that were true, the Alliance would not have come to save us. There are still those in this galaxy who believe in the Jedi, Kol. They will fight for us, but we must show them a *reason*."

"But there is still such risk," K'Kruhk said. "I have seen the Jedi end once before. I do not want to see it again."

With a low roar, Lowbacca reminded Kol that his decision was, ultimately, his to make, and that they would follow whatever decision he made.

Kol sighed again. He bowed his head, half in gratitude, half in weariness. "Thank you, Masters. I will consider everything you've said. And when I've decided... You will be the first to know."

This was a moment that had been prepared for months and anticipated for years, but it was a time for work, not celebration. Veed was busy at the Yaga Minor shipyards, getting his fleet ready to sail. As Intel Director Seniac's most trusted lieutenant, Nyna Calixte had been given a list of tasks

to assist the coming war effort. She would attend to all of them soon, but first there was a reckoning.

She placed the call to her anonymous benefactor from the security of her quarters' personal comm system. She waited, waited longer than usual, and received no reply. That had never happened before and she spent the next half-hour grimly pondering what that meant while she began drawing lists of assignments for her spies within the Alliance. Then, very suddenly, her comm system announced an incoming call.

The bland human face appeared before her. Very calmly it said, "We are sorry we missed your earlier communication."

"Thank you for returning it." Calixte willed her voice to stay steady. "It's very busy here on Bastion."

"We're well aware."

"You have what you want. A war between the Empire and the Alliance."

"What *you* want, Moff Calixte."

She gave a small nod. "Now we must ensure it is won. No small task, but I believe it can be done."

"So do we."

She crossed her arms. "You remember my request the last time we spoke. If we're going to continue to be partners, I'm going to need some honesty. I need to know *who* you are."

That computer-generated façade stared at her for twenty full seconds before it said, "Ask, and you will receive."

The holo shut off without warning. She peered at the controls: the transmission had been cut. She had only a second for consternation before the door buzzer sounded. Nyna Calixte was not a woman who let who emotions show easily, but right then she literally jumped in shock. The buzzer sounded again. They- her mysterious benefactor, client, fellow schemer- was somehow inside her secure residential complex, at her door, at this very moment.

Which meant this being already knew far more about her than she knew about it. And if it could make this little show it could do a lot more.

The buzzer sounded a third time. Heart racing, Calixte stepped over to her desk and grabbed the hold-out blaster she

kept there. Clutching it with her right hand, tucking it behind her back, she skirted into her living room and went to the door. A fourth ring. Before opening the door she tapped the controls to check the camera placed on the other side, showing the entrance. Only static.

It had been a long time since Nyna Calixte had known this kind of fear, but there was only one thing to do. Blaster clasped behind her back, she tapped the controls and the door slid open.

Standing before her was a single humanoid woman, young. A red face with two black circles on the forehead, long black hair pulled into a topknot, piercing red-gold eyes. Devaronian. She wore a black dress that left her arms bare.

“Greetings,” the Devaronian said plainly. “May I come in?”

Calixte stepped back and watched the Devaronian step into the room. The door closed behind her. They stared at each other without moving deeper inside.

Those red-gold eyes unsettled Calixte. She’d heard something about eyes like that, but couldn’t remember what. Had it been from Kol?

“Am I what you were expecting?” the newcomer asked, with a touch of amusement.

“I wasn’t expecting anything specific. But no, you’re not.”

Gold eyes drifted to Calixte’s unseen hand. “You’ll have no need for that.”

“I hope not.” She didn’t drop the weapon. “I was promised honesty. Let’s start with your name.”

“I was born Malincha,” the Devaronian said with a smile, almost wistful. “Now I am called Darth Maladi.”

Calixte’s father had been used by Sith; though she’d never learned the specifics, she knew their machinations had led to Damien Corde’s demise. It took all her effort not to pull out her pistol and shoot. “Sith,” she hissed. “I thought the Jedi killed you on Hapes.”

“The Sith are never truly gone. They’re as eternal as the Jedi.” Maladi spread scarlet hands. “And even then, report of our demise at Hapes was... quite exaggerated.”

“So there are more of you. Are you the master, or the apprentice?”

Another smile, bemused, quirked Maladi's lips. "How is it you know so much about Sith?"

Calixte prayed this creature didn't know about Morrigan Corde and her relationship with Kol. "I know about a lot of things. It *is* my job."

"Well, your knowledge is out of date. I am but one of many."

"How comforting."

"Don't be snide, Moff Calixte. We've already accomplished so much together. We'll accomplish even more. You want the Empire ascendant? So do we. You want power? We want you to have it."

"Do you?"

"Indeed. Once the Empire achieves supremacy over the Alliance, we naturally expect to be rewarded for giving you our help."

"Naturally."

"Yes. But the galaxy at large will be less accepting of Sith rule."

"So you'll need puppets."

"That is... a harsh term. And not accurate. The Sith seek to direct the flow of galactic history. The actual *management* of the Empire can be left to other competent individuals. Admiral Veed, for instance. And yourself."

"No patience for the details, then?"

"Our master is concerned with the big picture," Maladi said blandly.

"So you have *one* master, then? And how many underlings?"

"Many, but one." Maladi folded her hands behind her back and looked calmly around the living room, like she was appraising the furniture. "We're quite pleased with your performance thus far. You have a gift for subterfuge. I understand you have a long career in intelligence."

"That's right." Back when she'd been around Kol, Calixte had learned techniques to hide unwanted thoughts from his Force-senses. They'd seemed to work on him, and later on Roan Fel. She tried those techniques now, but she had no idea how well they'd hold against a Sith.

"Well, my experience leans in a similar direction," Maladi said. "You may view me as your... counterpart."

"That's good to know. But... I have to ask. You're Sith. That means what you want, what you *really* want, is to destroy the Jedi."

"Oh, we're not as petty as that. The Sith seek to advance ourselves and our hold over the galaxy. Much like you. The Jedi are primarily... impediments."

"So you're not mad the attack on Ossus failed?"

Maladi shrugged. "When a battle charge is led by revenge-crazed rabble, you can't hope for too much. Our real goal was to spark the fire between the Empire and Alliance. That has been accomplished. However, we are concerned that the Jedi knew of the attack in advance. That they managed to hire a fleet of Mandalorians was quite surprising."

"It surprised us as well." Calixte hoped her lie passed.

Maladi's eyes narrowed, and for a heart-stopping second Calixte was afraid she'd been seen through, that this Sith witch knew about everything, even Kol and Cade. Then Maladi said, "I trust you're using all your resources to find how the Jedi knew."

"I am. Roan Fel assigned me with the same task." She'd make sure to come up convincingly empty. "Tell me... Where do Fel and his Knights sit in your plans?"

"They'll have to be eliminated, of course. That's why we need you and Veed to keep order once he's gone."

"Ah. I expected as much. I'm glad to be... indispensable."

"As well you should be." Maladi smiled again; slanted, cruel. "We Sith reward those who serve us well. To those who think they can outwit us, only the worst fates await. Remember that, Moff Calixte, and I have no doubt our partnership will be a spectacular success."

When her son announced that as many Jedi as possible were to gather at the Temple's largest audience hall, it took Jade by surprise just like everyone else. She knew the questions Kol had been wrestling with the past two days; together with Nat they're spoken together privately as a family, weighing the risks and responsibilities that would

come with Jedi taking up arms in another war. Since the failure of the Ossus Project she'd watched Kol, who'd always seemed so resilient, so young, wilt under increasing pressure of a situation spiraling further past his control.

She found Nat on the way to the chamber. He had Cade with him; the boy looked as unsettled as the rest of them. He was merely twelve years old, and Jade's heart clenched at the thought of her grandson being killed or, nearly as bad, suffering the early loss of a parent like she had.

The three Skywalkers stayed together as they joined the audience. Soft murmurs ran through the crowd, dozens of private conversations full of questions and concern, but Jade, Nat, and Cade remained expectantly silent, turned toward the unadorned stage at the far side of the room. It was empty, but she knew Kol step out to speak soon. She could feel him in the Force, nearby, trying to banish his doubts and muster fortitude.

She could feel him struggling. Jade looked down at Cade and knew he was feeling his father's turmoil. The boy's attempt at brave expression faltered. Jade knew Kol had always looked up to his father with a pure admiration. It was far different from Jade's relationship with her father Ben, and she envied Cade and Kol their simple love. What happened next would complicate and probably harm that love; she only hoped it would survive.

The chamber became truly packed with Jedi. It seemed that every able-bodied being in the Temple had answered Kol's call. Jade had never been tall, and she pitched herself onto her toes to get a better scan of the crowd. Towering brown-furred Karrashchakuk was easy to spot, but his father Lowbacca looked absent. So was the equally-unmissable K'Kruhk. Jade did mark Nei Rin, as well as the three Yuuzhan Vong warriors who'd defended the younglings during the attack. She'd heard one of them had been wounded in the fighting, but Khat Lah stood stiff and alert, constantly scanning the crowd as though he expected enemy infiltrators to pop out of nowhere.

When Kol stepped onto the stage he was joined by the other members of the Jedi Council including K'Kruhk and

Lowbacca, all in the brown robes that acted as Jedi formalwear. Kol stepped to the stage's edge and looked out on all the assembled Jedi. Through the Force Jade felt her son's vertigo, his shock at the simple number of beings gathered to hear their fate from his lips.

Then Kol gathered himself and said, "You all know the decision that we face. The Alliance and the Empire are on the brink of war the likes of which the galaxy hasn't seen in generations. Neither side seems willing to back down. Though the Jedi never want war, we've played a critical part in bringing the galaxy to this point. It has even been said that this war is being fought *over* the Jedi.

"That is not true. This war happened because the Ossus Project, and its dream of peaceful cooperation between the Yuuzhan Vong and the people of this galaxy, was despoiled. The beings who did this are the ones who've brought the galaxy to war. They will be uncovered and held accountable. I swear to this. We will not stop searching until the truth is found."

Jade glanced sideways at the four Yuuzhan Vong in the audience. They gave no response, not even a nod, but she found resolve on their faces.

"Unfortunately," Kol said, "That is not *all* we must do. The Alliance triumvirate has requested that Jedi Knights join their troops on the front lines of the war. After careful consideration, and consultation with all members of the Council, I have agreed to their decision."

Most of the assembled Jedi kept silent at his pronouncement; instead doubt, confusion, shock and consternation collided in the Force. Jade put a hand on Cade's shoulder and tried to shield the boy from it.

"Jedi are keeper of the peace. We are not soldiers," said Kol. "But sometimes it is necessary to take a stand. Sometimes it is necessary to fight. I will not *require* Jedi to go into battle. I will not order individuals to act against their conscience. Once details are worked out with the Alliance, all who are willing and able to fight will given the chance to do so. Those who would prefer to help in other ways- as frontline healers, scouts, intelligence agents- will also have

their chance. Please, search yourselves, search the Force, and decide what is right for you.

“But I will say this: Alliance soldiers have already fought to defend the Jedi. Many more will die for us. We cannot dishonor their sacrifices by hiding from battle. Most of the galaxy still believes in the Jedi. We will not disappoint them. For those who’ve lost their faith, we will regain it by standing firm in our beliefs, by acting for justice and compassion, and by serving the light side of the Force.”

From Kol’s shoulder, Lowbacca gave a supporting trill. Karrashchakuk echoed it from the crowd and ripples of applause ran through the audience. Yet as a show of support it felt tepid to Jade, confused and slightly hollow.

“That’s it, then.” Cade’s voice was barely audible over the clapping. “We’re really going to war.”

“Not apprentices,” said Nat.

“But you, and dad, and-”

“Shhhh,” said Jade. She stroked his head. “If we have to fight, we’ll fight to protect the future of the Jedi Order. To protect you.”

Her grandson looked at her with wide eyes, helpless and pleading.

“We won’t let harm come to you.” Jade ran fingers through his blond hair. “Not ever.”

To herself she thought, *not yet*.

PART II



INFERNO

Chapter Eleven

In its haste to back up its besieged allies at Botajef, the Galactic Alliance fleet stationed at Celanon cut a straight vector from one system to the other in what should have been a ninety-minute sprint through hyperspace. It was their haste that doomed them. When they were wrenched from lightspeed midway through the journey, suddenly in empty void billions of kilometers from any star or planet, it took the crews a few frantic moments to understand what had happened. Over two hundred pulse mass generator mines purchased from the Hapans and fitted with special sensor-jammers had been set in wait with artificial gravity wells up and ready to wrench any passing ship out of lightspeed. As the Alliance crews scrambled to locate the mines through the jamming, Imperial scout ships waiting far from the battle zone sent tight-beamed signals to their host ships, marking the trap as sprung. Less than ninety seconds after the Alliance ships were torn from hyperspace, they were surrounded by nearly twice as many Imperial vessels.

Almost a year of fighting between the Empire and the Alliance had taken a grueling psychological toll on both sides. As he stood on the bridge of the Imperial flagship *Preeminence*, Eshkar Niin could feel the tension running through its crew; more, he could feel the anger in so many of them. Despite the hundreds of worlds that had defected to the Empire or declared themselves neutral, the Alliance had gone into this war with a massive advantage in people and manpower, and after a few early Imperial victories they'd

managed to grind the Empire's advance to a bloody halt. Every soldier of the Empire nowadays could name a friend who'd died in the past year. Niin knew many whispered that the war was a mistake, and alternatively blamed Fel, the Moff Council, of both. Yet now they faced their enemy, and for once they had a decisive advantage. The soldiers of the Empire wanted to win. They wanted blood.

Tokar Reave was ready to oblige them. The ambitious young admiral, a protégé of Morlish Veed, had put a lot of effort into this trap, and his eagerness bled off him in the Force. Yet while Reave was ranking officer aboard *Preeminence*, he was not the mission commander. That honor belonged to Empress Elliah Fel, who ordered the communications officer to prepare a broadcast to the entire Alliance fleet.

As the empress's bodyguards, Niin and his apprentice Draco had joined her on this rare excursion to the front lines. She wore a variation of standard Imperial Knight armor that was gleaming white instead of scarlet and contrasted elegantly with her straight black hair. Niin watched with admiration as Elliah stood regal in front of the comm station and spoke.

"I call on all Alliance ships to surrender," she said. "This is a battle you cannot win. We have no wish to kill you. You have my word, as empress, that all officers will be treated well. All enlisted crew will be processed and released. There is no need for anyone to die today. When you go back to your homes, please take with you word of the Empire's generosity, and the knowledge that *we* are not your enemies. This is a war none of us should be fighting.

"All ships that broadcast a surrender signal will not be harmed. All others will be attacked with full force. We will give you five minutes."

It was a clever and calculated ploy to sow discord on Alliance ships. Every one of their crew would see it. Yet Elliah spoke with the weight of earnest conviction. It came through in her voice, and Niin could feel it in the Force. If even a handful of Alliance ships surrendered- if they mutinied- it could change this war completely.

Elliah stepped away from the comm station and stood between Niin and Draco. Reave paced anxiously in front of the forward viewport, ready to get to the killing stage. The crew waited for five full minutes, tension mounting. Not a single Alliance vessel signaled its aim to surrender. Right when time was almost up, *Preeminence* received a hail from the Alliance flagship, *Indomitable*.

“Put him on.” Reave snapped two fingers at the comm lieutenant. He didn’t even give Elliah a chance to join him before a holo appeared in front of him.

“This is Admiral Gar Stazi of the Galactic Alliance Fifth Fleet.” The Duros’ flat face was difficult to read, but the strength in his voice was clear. “As you can see, we stand united against you.”

“You are trapped, with no hope of escape. Your allies on Botajef are being crushed as we speak.” Reave clasped his hands behind his back. “We did not choose a slaughter. *You* did.”

“If that’s how you’d assuage your conscience, so be it,” Stazi sniffed. “Good day, Admiral.”

The holo disappeared, and just like that the battle started. The Alliance ships opened fire first, not at the Imperials encroaching around them but at the pulse-mass mines. With over two hundred out there, they’d take a while to destroy, and Stazi’s people would have bigger problems very soon.

As Reave began barking commands to his tactical lieutenant, ordering precise charge of his various battle groups, Elliah exhaled and said, “We tried our best.” She emanated defeat in the Force.

“That we did, Majesty,” whispered Niin. “That we did.”

When the first salvo impacted on *Indomitable*’s shields the entire command deck shuddered. Jaius Yorub braced himself and stayed on his feet while other crew were caught mid-stride and knocked to their knees. The battle was going to get very fierce very fast, and it was essential for the ship’s captain to project confidence and calm.

The squat Sullustan immediately began barking out orders. On Yorub’s command, the gunnery crews took their targets

and began returning fire at the nearest enemies: one star destroyer and a trio of frigates. At the same time, Admiral Stazi was at the tactical station, giving orders that were relayed throughout the fleet. As *Indomitable* and the other heavy cruisers took the brunt of the Imperial advance, the picket ships and starfighters would continue hunting down the interdiction mines.

During the long five minutes the Imperials had given them to surrender, Yorub and Stazi had not been idle. They'd managed to slip a communication through the jamming, relaying their situation to the second Alliance task force en route to Botajef from a staging point at Bandomeer. A simple response had slipped back: Hold position.

So they'd hold against dire odds or die trying. Not that Yorub had expected any other response from Stazi.

The Fighting Fifth had spent most of the past year on the front lines, pushing back the Empire's initial advance. The Alliance's advantages in resources and manpower- not to mention its Jedi helpers- were starting to show themselves, and the war now seemed at a tipping point where the Alliance could start taking Imperial systems. Common wisdom, or at least common hope, was that once Roan Fel started losing planets, he'd sue for peace.

But the Empire wasn't giving up, not yet. Their offensive at Botajef had caught the Alliance off-guard, and Coruscant had hastily hired a band of Mandalorians to salvage its defense until the fleets from Bandomeer and Celanon arrived. Now it looked like the Botajef offensive had been mere bait for this trap. The Alliance, hasty and overconfident, had jumped right in. Just like, some said, they'd jumped overeager into the war.

Yorub had his opinions, just like every soldier, but in the middle of battle they were a luxury. Once *Indomitable's* crew had their orders, the Sullustan walked carefully across a still-trembling deck to the tactical station. The tactical holo told him the sitrep he needed: Imperial forces encroaching from all sides, combat joined at seven distinct points, Alliance cruisers spread dangerously thin in order to cover the attacks on the interdiction mines. Once they cleared those

the cruisers could tighten formation, assuming they didn't lose too many to the Imperials. Just as Yorub thought it, he watched one big green holo-marker flare and die.

"We've lost *Mon Selona*," the tactical lieutenant shook her head. "Should we send salvage crews?"

"Not now." Stazi scowled and shook his head. "They'd be too vulnerable."

The lieutenant nodded grimly. Yorub stepped beside Stazi and asked quietly, "Any idea how long we have to hold?"

"The message didn't say."

Lovely. Yorub looked at the holo again. The Imperial flagship was hanging back, avoiding direct confrontation, but a pair of hefty *Pellaeon*-class star destroyers were moving from the rear lines and vectoring toward *Indomitable*.

"Admiral—"

"I see it, Captain." Stazi exhaled, thought. "Lieutenant, patch me in directly with our Jedi friends."

"Yes, Admiral." The lieutenant's hands danced across her console. "Channel's open."

Stazi bent over her shoulder. "Master Qemar, do you copy?"

"I hear you, Admiral." The Nautolan's voice was static-marred.

"I need you to pull your fighters off mine-hunting duty. They're making a direct attack on *Indomitable*, two destroyers inbound. I'll send our squadrons to slow them down but they'll need your help."

"Affirmative. All my ships?"

"Please."

"Understood. Will comply."

The connection shut off. Stazi exhaled again, somewhere between a sigh and a growl. It was the most frustration he ever showed on the bridge. Yorub knew he didn't like relying on Jedi.

Since the war's beginning Jedi had loaned their aid, most often in the form of elite starfighter or infantry squadrons that spearheaded more traditional forces. Stazi's battle group included a mere two dozen Jedi pilots in Twintails, but they were worth a standard wing of normal fighters. They

wouldn't stop those destroyers, but they could well slow them down.

"They'll buy us time," Stazi muttered. "Just a little more time."

Imperial Knights were sworn to obey their emperor and Roan Fel has staunchly forbidden them from taking part in the fighting. Nonetheless, Niin could appreciate the battle for its complex strategy and dark beauty. The Alliance had initially tried to both hunt down the interdiction mines and defend against Imperial attacks, but as the battle got fierce the Alliance gave up on mine-hunting and tightened formation of its capital ships. When Reave ordered two star destroyers to directly go after the Alliance flagship, they were repulsed by an especially fierce wave of starfighter attacks. When Niin suggested that it might have been Jedi pilots at work, Reave simply scowled and waved him off.

Even if the Jedi were blunting the advance, there were too few to stop it. The Imperials were nibbling away at the outer edges of the Alliance formation. Eventually they'd gnaw their way to the center. They'd take heavy casualties at this rate, but they'd still wipe out an entire Alliance battle group, and hopefully they'd succeed in taking Botajef as well. It was recipe for a badly-needed victory, and Niin found himself elated at the prospect.

Against his own confidence he felt Elliah's foreboding. He leaned close to the Empress and asked, "What's wrong? Do you sense something in the Force?"

"Not the way you think." Her lips made a flat line. "If we win here, we'll extend the war."

"That's what we need. If we took any more losses we'd be humiliated."

"But it would *end*, Eshkar. A victory here just forestalls defeat."

He was surprised by her pessimism. "The Alliance had advantages... But we can still win the war. We have the Force on our side."

She looked at him, a question in her eyes, but nothing on her lips.

"Yes, I believe that," Niin insisted. "By siding with the Vong, the Jedi have brought this war on us all. The sad thing is they can't even see it."

Her question was replaced by nebulous doubt. She looked away without saying more.

Niin watched through the forward viewport as another big Mon Calamari cruiser lit up in the distance. He nodded in approval as Reave gave the order to bring two more star destroyers forward, though *Preeminence* remained at the rear of the Imperial formation.

Just as the destroyers joined the fray, the tactical display lit up a wreath of light at the very edge of the interdiction field. That could only mean new arrivals, and Niin's chest tightened as the markers all turned red at once. A second Alliance battle group had arrived to rescue the first, and it looked approximately the same size. The battle had turned from a rout to a near-even match, only now the Imperials were the ones pressed on all sides.

It changed everything, but to his credit Reave didn't freeze up in shock. "Helm, swing us around. Prepare forward batteries!" he called. "All ships on the outer edge, stand by to defend. All inner ships, keep up the attack until I say otherwise."

"The mines, sir?" asked an officer.

Reave hesitated for just a second. "Deactivate them. If Alliance ships want to run instead of fight, let them. It'll just even the odds."

When he finished giving orders, Reave finally deigned to notice his empress and her Knights. "The day is not lost yet, Majesty," he said with stony conviction.

Elliah merely nodded, then let him get back to the fight.

The arrival of the second battle group spread applause and badly-needed optimism across *Indomitable's* bridge, but it became clear that the fight was far from over. The Imperial ships that had pinned down Stazi's group continued their attack, even as the mines shut down and the interdiction field vanished. No matter the eventual victor, this would be a bloody brawl for both sides.

The pounding on *Indomitable's* shields didn't relent a bit, and Yorub had to make a round over the bridge, telling everyone to stay sharp and keep fighting. Stazi, meanwhile, hurried to the comm station to receive a transmission from the new Alliance fleet. Yorub circled around to join them for the tail end of the conversation and was surprised to see the flickering blue holo-image of Admiral Lekhwash himself.

"The Imperials are in no mood to relent, but we can spread their forces thin." The supreme commander's mouth-tentacles quivered.

"Admiral, we're taking a pounding here," said Stazi. "We need to find their weakest point and punch out."

Yorub stiffened; such a move would be decisive, but could be extremely costly.

"I understand," said Lekhwash. "The Imperials are still confused and trying to adjust formation. We'll have to act quickly. Do you see a break-out point?" Despite the Quarren's staid demeanor, his tactics could be as bold and risky and Stazi's.

Stazi scanned the tactical holo and made his decision quickly. "There's an open space just past *Radiant* and *Alsakan Star*. I'll order them to lead the charge. Everyone else will fall in after them. I'll keep *Indomitable* in the rear to guard. Admiral, did you bring a Jedi strike team with you?"

"They've just launched. Two squadrons."

"Send them in as vanguards. I'll have my Jedi meet yours."

The Quarren shook his head. "I'll send one squadron, Admiral. That should be enough."

"The other?"

His mouth-tentacles quivered, perhaps in excitement. "I'm sending them after the Imperial flagship. We'll see how well *they* direct a battle while under fire."

"Admiral, you should know. Empress Fel is aboard that ship."

"Truly?"

"She contacted us directly, asking for our surrender."

Yorub could see the consideration on both their faces, the ambition. To seize the empress alive, even to kill her, wouldn't just salvage the fight; it could end the war.

But there was no time to dwell on it. *Indomitable* had closer battles to fight. Lekhwash said, "Time to move. Good fighting, Admiral."

"You too, sir." The Duros snapped a salute. Lekhwash snapped it back, and the holo died. Stazi spun on his heel, mouth open to give necessary orders, but Yorub had already begun.

Less than a minute after launching from Admiral Lekhwash's mighty *Krakana*, the formation of Jedi fighters broke formation and streak in divergent directions. Sitting tight in the cockpit of his Twintail, Lowbacca felt a twinge of farewell from his son as Karrashchakuk led his squadron toward the weak spot in the Imperial formation where the trapped Alliance ships were about to break through. Lowbacca, meanwhile, led his pilots on a long arc, skirting the battle zone entirely as they swung toward the distant pale wedge of the Imperial flagship, *Preeminence*.

The dispatcher aboard *Krakana* made their mission quite clear: harass and cripple *Preeminence*. That was a tall order for twelve snubfighters, even ones flown by Force-melded battle-hardened Jedi. *Krakana* had promised backup was on the way and specified nothing more.

It was the kind of situation the Jedi had found themselves in again and again since pledging their support to the Alliance in this war. The commanders, even otherwise canny ones like Lekhwash, seemed to think of Jedi as an invincible elite, capable of accomplishing miracles. It was flattering and frustrating at once, and Lowbacca had lost several Jedi in fights that never should have been fought in the first place.

Krakana had at least given a reason for this attack: Empress Elliah Fel was aboard *Preeminence*, which right now had most of its shields shunted forward, toward the approaching Alliance ships and away from the command deck.

Lowbacca maintained the battle meld as the twelve Jedi fighters soared in tight formation, flying wingtip-to-wingtip toward the star destroyer's long white profile. A handful of Alliance bombers were harassing its nose, but nothing else.

As it drew close enough to stretch across Lowbacca's cockpit view, he sent a signal to the other Jedi to cut power to thrust engines. They did just that, and the Twintails continued to soar ahead, impelled by inertia toward the destroyer. Without thrusters blazing they'd be much harder to spot. Lowbacca felt tension and anticipation rising through the meld as *Preeminence* grew closer, closer, obscuring black space with its great white hull. He was tempted to reach out with the Force and find Empress Fel, but in doing so he'd alert her to their presence.

Instead he scanned the destroyer's flank with his eyes, watching every gun turret. When the long barrel finally swung their way, he alerted his pilots with a roar. The Jedi used the Force to nudge their fighters clear of the incoming turbolaser blasts and reignited their engines. No TIEs came swooping down for them, but it was only a matter of time.

Lowbacca commanded the Jedi to break into shield trios and pushed his fighter toward the destroyer's bridge. A century ago Imperial star destroyers had put their command decks on towers that begged for torpedoes; these *Pellaeon*-class ships had recessed bridges, harder to hit but still vulnerable. He aimed for the shield generators- no longer bulging spheres, but half-recessed domes several levels down on the tiered hull- and fired the second he reached range. Behind him, Wolf Sazen and his wingmate launched torpedoes of their own. The three Jedi broke formation but Lowbacca watched their warheads. There was a great flash, and first he thought the torps had impacted on fast-raised shields. Then he saw that at least two had gotten through and torn a flaming hole through the generator dome.

"Starboard generator is down," Sazen reported. "They're trying to compensate."

The port generator would be powered to full and expanded to protect the entire command section, but it had to be hit anyway. Lowbacca and his wingmates soared over the bridge, and as they passed it he felt a mind reach out to touch his in the Force, then quickly recede. Empress Fel or one of her guards. Roan Fel had ordered his Knights off the front lines, and Lowbacca was unspeakably glad not to have to battle

other Force-users in this war. Today looked like a grim exception.

Preeminence was fully alerted to their presence. Turbolasers chased Lowbacca's trio as they spun away. Through the Force, he felt other pilots engaged in furious dogfights with newly-arrived TIE Predators.

He was about to patch in a call to *Krakana* and ask where their backup was; then he got his answer. A pair of sabertoothed Mon Cal assault frigates dropped out of hyperspace dangerously close to *Preeminence*. They opened fire immediately, catching the destroyer with its shields weakened, overpowering the energy barriers and gouging geysers of flame and debris out of its hull.

Lowbacca growled and glanced at his tactical scanners. More squadrons were on their way- old D-wing bombers, some Crossfire interceptors- plus a heavy Mon Cal cruiser. Lowbacca didn't know if the Alliance had enough ships to both free Stazi's fleet and capture Empress Fel's destroyer, but Lekhwash seemed determined to try. The supreme commander was a bold one, maybe too bold.

"All Jedi units, this is Fleet Command," the familiar voice from *Krakana* said. "Continue the assault of *Preeminence*! Concentrate fire on its engines! Our goal is to cripple the ship and capture its personnel."

Lowbacca roared his affirmative, and to his Jedi he spoke through the battle-meld. *Continue fighting*, he said. *Fight and we can end the war!*

Everything had been going so *well*. Just minutes before the Jedi launched their sneak-attack on *Preeminence*, two Alliance cruisers trying to sneak past the Imperial blockade had been vaporized; then a report had come in from Botajef, saying that its Mandalorian defenders had suddenly switched sides mid-battle and withdrawn, leaving the planet securely in Imperial hands. The elation of that surprise victory was cut instantly short when their starboard shield generator blew; seconds later, the sabertooth frigates dropped off their port bow and began pounding them with reckless ferocity.

Just like that, the battle was upended. The bridge trembled fiercely as power failures cascaded through the ship, blinking out lights, dropping shields, and even straining internal gravity. Admiral Reave, who'd kept impressively calm until now, began screaming orders at a crew already in panic. Eshkar Niin could feel mortal dread rise like a drowning tide, from the crew and from Draco beside him, even from the empress herself.

It threatened him too but for only a moment. Then he remembered his duty. Gripping Elliah's arm he said, "Empress, we must abandon ship immediately."

He felt her uncertainty, saw it in her eyes. Reave was still giving orders to his crew, but beyond the viewport Niin could see more explosions tear open *Preeminence's* hull. The overhead lights flickered again, died, and did not return, leaving the bridge crew to move about in an eerie dull red emergency glow.

"Admiral Reave!" Elliah called.

Reave snapped out a few more orders, then hurried toward her. "Yes, Empress?"

"The ship is lost," she said. Not a question, a statement.

Reave opened his mouth to object, then snapped it shut. "The situation is dire."

"The Empress must escape alive," Niin said. "We'll leave for her shuttle immediately."

Elliah nudged him with the Force, quieting him. To Reave she said, "I'm sorry to request this, Admiral, but please, command covering fire while we escape. After we're gone, you may fight or surrender as you see fit. I strongly recommend that, once we leave, you order a full retreat. We're going to lose enough ships and people today as it is. The Empire can't afford to lose more."

Niin felt the warring emotions peeling off the young admiral: anger, indignation, most of all shame at the ruin of his grand plans. To his empress, though, he saluted and said, "As you command, Majesty."

"Your service is appreciated." She raised her voice so the entire bridge could hear. "All of you are appreciated. Your service and loyalty will not be forgotten today."

Niin understand that, as empress, it was her duty to show appreciation and solidarity for her people, but they were short on time. As she spoke, more explosions gouged deeper holes in *Preeminence's* hull. He tightened his grip on her arm and sent urgency through the Force. This time she acquiesced, and Niin and Draco ushered her the blast doors, off the bridge, down trembling hallways toward the lift that would carry them down to the private hangar.

On a *Pellaeon*-class ship it took exactly seventy minutes and twenty seconds to get from bridge to hanger at a clipped pace. When the rattling lift tube released them, he and Draco burst into a sprint. Elliah hurried along with them, three sets of boots clattering down the hall, announcing themselves to pedestrians and forcing them aside.

The Empress' personal transport, a scarlet *Sigma*-class shuttle more armed and durable than it looked, sat alone in *Preeminence's* secondary hangar. Whirling starfighters, strobing turbolasers, and explosions flashed through the great floor-to-ceiling portal. Reaves must have called down from the bridge, because deck crews were doing frenzied take-off prep and system checks as Elliah and the two Knights sprinted across the flight deck.

They got halfway across when an out-of-control TIE Predator smashed into the hangar mouth. The atmospheric force-field vanished instantly. Flaming debris flew through the hangar, then reversed as atmosphere gushed into the vacuum, taking three deck crew with it. In the corner of his eye Niin saw a piece of shrapnel come from nowhere and pin Elliah in the chest. the empress staggered in pain, then slid fast toward the portal.

For the first time since the battle started Niin knew true panic. Even as the deck slipped out from under his feet he reached out with the Force and grabbed Elliah. Her body lifted off the deck; escaping air whipped around her, flailing clothes and hair, spooling out a long string of blood. Niin felt her pain, felt her panic, and didn't notice that he, too, was being pulled out toward the portal until he felt Force-grip tug him back.

Keeping a firm mental grip on the empress he looked backward. As he used the Force to steady himself and Niin both, Antares Draco whipped a fiberchord cable out from his belt and threw it at the shuttle, which was too heavy to be sucked into space. His cable coiled magnetically tight around a landing strut and Draco tried to reel all three of them in.

A swell of pride for his apprentice tempered Niin's panic. The empress was wounded, terribly; if she died the emperor would never forgive him and worse, he'd never forgive himself. But impulsive, temperamental Draco had the situation under control. Niin pulled Elliah closer to him and himself closer to Draco. Through her pain, Elliah found the Force as well. When Draco put both hands on the landing struts the hangar's atmosphere was almost wholly gone, but Niin and Elliah were right behind him, and all together they stumbled up the landing ramp and inside the shuttle.

Now Niin acted quickly. He slammed the button that closed the shuttle ramp, sealing them in the pressurized, oxygenated space. Draco was right behind him and though Niin yearned to go back into the hold and check on Elliah's injuries he knew escape was above all else. He warmed the engines; Draco turned on the repulsors and retracted landing gear. More explosions flared outside the hangar, and Niin thumbed on the comm system.

"*Preeminence*, this is Knight One. Preparing to escape now."

"We'll give you fighter escort." He heard Reave's voice, relieved. "May the Force be with you."

"And you as well, Admiral."

Niin killed the connection and pushed power to the engines. Draco turned on the shields and announced weapons ready. The shuttle pushed swiftly out of the hangar, into the fray. A sabertoothed Mon Cal frigate sat off their starboard bow, but it was busy pumping laserfire into *Preeminence's* battered hull.

"Crossfires, coming in behind us," Draco reported, voice shaky. "Aft shields on."

As if on cue, laserfire rocked the shuttle but didn't breach defenses. Draco retuned fire, scattering the pursuers but not

destroying them. At the same time, a group of TIE Predators fell in on their aft and flanks, forming a protective wall.

Niin tapped the comm line on. "Fighter escort, link your nav computers to ours and join us in hyperspace." As the TIEs sent affirmatives, Niin look to Draco. "Do we have a course?"

"Calculating," the young human scowled.

"Just plot a microjump and get us clear."

"There's so much inter- Damn!"

"What?"

"Twintail fighters, coming in fast." He looked at his master. "Jedi?"

"I don't want to find out," Niin growled, and against himself checked the scanners. The Twintails were coming from their port flank and the TIE Predators were shifting to block. *Preeminence* was a wreck behind them, and the battle otherwise was a confused tangle, with both Alliance and Imperial ships vectoring to escape and cutting eachother off in the process. Strategically this fight could be a draw, but it felt like a defeat.

"I've got an exit!" Draco announced.

"Do it," Niin said.

The human grabbed the throttle laying between them, pulled it back, and sent the shuttle leaping into hyperspace. As starlight surrounded them Draco released a huge held-in breath and slumped in his chair, but Niin bounded out of the cockpit, back to the hold.

Empress Elliah Fel had pulled herself over to one of the crash couches and found a first aid kit. Niin sat down beside her, took the kit, and looked over her wound. It was bleeding badly, and the sight of all that blood terrified him, but the shrapnel seemed to have taken her inside the shoulder, beneath the collar, tearing muscle but avoiding bones or major organs.

Nonetheless, he was frozen by the sight of her pale beautiful face as it contorted in pain. He should have been able to prevent this.

Then Draco joined them, and Niin came to his senses. He injected Elliah with anesthetic, then cut away her broken

armor plates, disinfected the wound, wiped blood off her white shoulder and closed the tears in her skin.

All the while her body shuddered. Her eyes flicked and only gasps seeped through dry lips. Once Niin closed the wound her eyes opened and she reached a trembling hand up. It cupped Niin's face and he froze yet again. She'd never touched him that way before. He'd wanted her to, but not like this.

"Did we... escape?" Her thumb stroked his cheek.

"Yes," Draco said. "We're on our way to Agamar. We'll get you healed there."

"Healing..." Her eyes flickered again. "Eshkar... You... all right?"

"I'm fine," he swallowed.

"You... trembling."

"I'm all right, Your Majesty." He took her hand, firm but gentle, and pulled it away from his face. "We've saved you. That's all that matters."

Chapter Twelve

Marin Solo stood on the landing pad and craned her neck back. They rose overhead like malformed towers: the eight-nacelle engine cluster of an old Corellian corvette, the organic-seeming bulk of two Mon Cal cruisers, the broad triangular wedge of an *Immobilizer*-class interdictor that jutted from the water like a compressed metal pyramid. The stone walls of the rift valley rose half a kilometer on all sides and gray sunlight slanted down through thick, moist air.

The world was called Taivas. It sat one orbit rimward of the gas giant Zhar, neglected in the larger world's shadow. The surface had barely any natural atmosphere, and magnetic anomalies played merry hell with the sensors of inbound ships. Furthermore, unexplained residual energies on the surface created blank spots in the Force, or so she'd been told. She hadn't tried to find out.

It was a strange place to build a hidden temple, but then, that was the point.

Marin turned her eyes from the starship-towers and looked at her cousin. Nat had been the one to suggest this location, and while Kol was overseeing the war effort, the older brother had quietly worked to prepare a Jedi refuge. He'd had some help from the woman standing next to him, a dark-skinned human with the yellow tattoo on her face marking her as a Kiffu guardian from clan Vos. Marin had never met her before, but he'd heard of her. Droo and Nat were, in the latter's term, 'attached,' and they were apparently so attached that Nat had brought her on to help in building the

hidden temple. Marin trusted her cousin's judgment, but they'd tried to keep Taivas as secret as possible, even from other Jedi.

For her part, Marin had provided materials and funds. Finding old unused starships wasn't that difficult, but purchasing, moving, and installing them didn't come cheap. Working mostly with Chereth Calrissian, Marin had managed money from their joint credit accounts to quietly build this place. That had taken most of the past year. At the same time, the Yuuzhan Vong shaper Nei Rin had introduced creatures into this continental rift that increased the local oxygen density and made it breathable. Once Nat and Droo installed a comm relay at the rift's edge, the place was ready to function.

It was a grand creation, but also an empty one. The landing platform jutted perpendicular from one of the Mon Cal cruisers and Marin felt very small as she stood with Nat, Droo, and one more Jedi: the ancient Master Tr'a Saa. Marin remembered the Neti vaguely from her days on Ossus. She'd been the embodiment of serenity and sage wisdom, none of which had done Marin much good.

"When will you bring more Jedi here?" Marin asked.

"A few will come to help finish construction." Tr'a Saa gestured to the ships jutting half-submerged in of the water. Their insides were being hollowed out, decks transformed into walls, but it was slow going with only a handful of Jedi and droids to do the work. "But not many. Most of the Jedi need to be out there... fighting in this war."

Nat gave a tiny grunt at that. Marin knew her cousin had been happy to escape front-line duty thus far. She also knew that, with the hidden temple made, he'd move onto something more direct and dangerous, not because he wanted to, but because his brother had set the lead and he was obliged to follow. It was a terrible thing, having to be what you weren't for the sake of your family. Marin knew that better than anyone.

"The Council has agreed that someone needs to stay and watch over this place." Tr'a Saa spread her hands. "I've volunteered to set roots here... permanently."

It took Marin a moment to understand. She knew little about Neti life cycles, but just being ambulatory like a human marked Tr'a Saa as young for her species. That, apparently, was about to change.

"I'm sure Kol appreciates your sacrifice," said Nat.

Tr'a Saa's smile was gentle. "It's no sacrifice. Only the natural order of things. I will protect this place... for centuries, if need be."

"Here's hoping it won't need protecting," Marin put in.

"The war's not going so bad so far." Droo crossed her arms over her chest.

Tr'a Saa shook her head. "The Jedi are no closer to finding out who sabotaged the Ossus Project. Until we find the truth, the whole galaxy is in danger."

"Is that a feeling you're getting in the Force?" asked Marin.

The two Jedi exchanged glances. Nat said, "Maybe in the Force, maybe in my gut. Can't tell one from the other sometimes."

"The Alliance has pushed back the Empire's advance," said Tr'a Saa. "But I'm afraid things might grind into a long stalemate. After Botajef, that seems to be the direction things are heading."

Marin couldn't restrain a frown. The Alliance was trying to spin the recent battles in the Belsmuth sector as a victory, since they had captured an Imperial admiral and smashed a portion of his fleet. Still, it was hard to cover up the loss of Botajef and, worse, the sudden withdrawal of the Mandalorian mercenaries from the war.

On the ride to Taivas, Marin had spent hours in *Run-around's* cockpit, listening to conflicting news reports and trying to contact her family. She'd only talked to her mother an hour before arrival. Some of her cousins had been fighting at Botajef under the command of Chernan Ordo, and their fates were still uncertain.

What was known was that Ordo was dead, and the new *Mand'alor* had announced the Mandalorians were falling back to their homeworld and ending their involvement in the war. Mandalorian units had been hired for limited but critical

jobs by the Alliance over the past year, and there was no way to know what their withdrawal would mean long-term.

Marin couldn't guess the future; what worried her more than anything, even the Skiratas missing in action, was the identity of the new *Mand'alor*: Yaga Auchs.

Since the start of this mess she'd tried to keep her involvement limited. She'd helped set the Mandalorians on the side of the Alliance at its start, then helped build up the hidden temple. Otherwise she'd tried to keep to her normal business, staying with Benet and Ania on *Fast Start* as they shipped cargo up and down the Rimma and Corellian Trade Spines, far from contested systems.

Yaga Auchs' ascension to *Mand'alor* was something she'd never anticipated and couldn't help feel responsible for. What she'd done to his father and uncle had made him into the man he was today. Her act of mercy had allowed Auchs to live at all and now, thirty years later, she wasn't sure she'd made the right choice after all.

"Have you heard anything about why the Mandalorians pulled out?" asked Nat.

Marin bit a curse. She'd forgotten what it was like to be around Jedi, always sensing each other's thoughts. "Not really." She avoided their eyes. The only ones who knew the full story were her parents. Even Benet didn't know. "I've... met Yaga Auchs. He never wanted Ordo to sign on with the Alliance."

"Do you think he'll join the Imperial cause?" asked Tr'a Saa.

"I don't know."

"Have you talked to your mother?" asked Nat.

"Yes. She says things are a mess on Mandalore right now. Auchs is stomping down rivals, that sort of thing."

"And your family?" asked Tr'a Saa.

Marin swallowed. Yes, she hated being around Jedi. They had no respect for secrets. "They're watching. Very carefully. Auchs is... no friend of the Skiratas, so they might have to scatter and hide."

"Wasn't another Auchs a Mandalore, way back?" asked Droo.

Marin closed her eyes and saw a helmeted head roll across the deck. Almost forty years on, it was still clear. "Gevern. He was Yaga's uncle."

"Will you go to them?" asked Nat.

Marin shook her head. "No. Not unless they really need help. I'm heading back to the Javin System. Benet and Ania are there."

"We appreciate all the help you've given," Tr'a Saa said politely. "This hidden temple could never have been built without you."

"I did what I could." She looked at Nat. "What about you? Going back to Ossus? Kiffar?"

"I'm going back to Kiffar," said Droo. "My Jedi here has other plans."

"Not Ossus either," Nat said. "Got a secret mission to run." He tapped a finger to his lips, forestalling questions.

"Then I guess I'll be going too." Marin looked back up at all the towering starship hulls. She'd put so much effort into making this place, but she hoped she'd never see it again. She hoped she'd done her part and could put all this turmoil-Jedi, Mandalorian, Alliance, Imperial- behind her.

She hoped, but no longer expected. The universe no longer seemed inclined to do her favors.

Strong winds buffeted the Sekotan flyer, and to Khat Lah it seemed like the entire planet was trying to wrench them from the air. Perhaps it truly was; storm-clouds had appeared from nothing just minutes ago to buffet and harass them.

Now thunder cracked and lightning threatened to leap out of billowing black and stab their ship. The sleek, wide-winged craft tried to hold position over the deep crater in which the world brain of Chasima was nested. In the cockpit, cognition hood over his face, Besh Lah communed with the flyer's mind and tried to soothe the living ship. As its dovin basal struggled to anchor it above the crater's center, Khat Lah and had joined Vua Yaght and Nei Rin at the ship's ventral portal. Wind and rain lashed their faces through the open gap as Besh Lah tried to lower them into the crater.

As with the ninety-nine other planets selected for the Ossus Project and subsequently despoiled, the Vongforming recreation of these worlds had begun with the seeding of a dhuryam, a specialized telepathic creature like a yammosk, advanced enough to govern the life-forms of an entire world. Each dhuryam had matured into a world-brain that should have overseen the Vongforming of its world.

Nei Rin had long held that the sudden, devastating transformation of each of the hundred worlds suggested a synchronized corruption of the world brains. A year ago they'd had to evacuate these planets suddenly, and had since petitioned every government for a chance to access its world brain, to examine it for proof of corruption. Unsurprisingly, the governments had rejected the Yuuzhan Vong's offer of help.

Now it was up to them to make contact with a world brain on their own.

Khat Lah looked into the crater and saw, at its bottom, a great pool of green-brown liquid. Rising from the center of the liquid was the single eye of the brain itself; as large in diameter as their flier's wingspan. Tentacles emerged from the pool and lashed upward like whipchords two meters thick. The flier stayed clear of the tentacles, but to accomplish their mission they needed to drop further into the pit.

"The world brain appears to be hostile," Khat Lah called over the howling wind.

"We came prepared for this," Nei Rin called back, though her voice was mournful. It pained her to have to harm the world brain.

Khat Lah ducked away from the portal and called toward the cockpit. Besh Lah got the message: a moment later the flier shuddered as a second portal on its underside opened, releasing a single spherical capsule. It dropped straight into the pool, barely nudged by wind, escaping one lash of the world brain's tentacles. The capsule disappeared with a splash and the tentacles reached skyward again.

The flyer was outside their grasp, but the violent winds allowed no comfort. "How long until the solution works?" Khat Lah asked.

"Only a few standard minutes." Nei Rin sounded doubtful, and for good reason. The solution she'd created, which should render the world brain temporarily unconscious, had been made using a recipe from a memory qahsa not accessed in centuries. There's been no chance to test its efficacy until now.

The flyer continued to rock violently in the storm, but Khat Lah peered down and watched the writhing of the tentacles weaken. A cloudy membrane repeatedly nictated over the world brain's single eye and the pool in which it sat quieted as the tentacles flailed less.

"The solution is having an effect," Vua Yaght said. "Should we lower now?"

Nei Rin shook her head. "Give it several more minutes."

A wise choice, perhaps, but not one that soothed Khat Lah's nerves as the flyer rocked in another storm-gust. Since the start of the war, he and his fellow warriors had joined Nei Rin in investigating the failure of the Ossus Project, but their efforts had repeatedly been foiled by hostile governments from the despoiled worlds. Eventually Nei Rin had decided the only option was to take what they needed, and so they'd come to Chasima, which offered a relatively unguarded target.

Once the tentacles finally disappeared beneath the pool's surface and stayed down, Nei Rin decided it was time to try getting close. Khat Lah bellowed the order up, and Besh Lah lowered the flyer straight down toward the pool. The great eye still nictated repeatedly and Khat Lah was reminded of a man fighting off sleep. The pool churned, but no tentacles rose up to smash their flyer out of the air.

"Lower the vine," Nei Rin ordered. "Khat Lah, with me."

Vua Yaght cast a long organic cable from the belly of the ship. It dangled to the base of the world brain and Khat Lah was the first to shimmy down. The violent winds made him sway; his stomach and head swayed too but he continued his steady descent until he could make one final jump. He landed at the base of the world brain's thick eyestalk. His feet pressed hard onto unsolid ground and he struggled to regain footing as the world brain's body shifted beneath him,

spilling muck from the pool around his armored calves. Nei Rin followed, and once she landed Khat Lah helped her move close to the eyestalk base.

From there, he did as ordered. He took his wide-bladed coufe and began to cut into the eyestalk's fleshy exterior at exactly the point Nei Rin indicated. Black blood spilled out from the wound and the world brain shifted once again, but no tentacles reached out to crush them. Finally, when he'd cut through the layers of muscle protecting the eyestalk's neural cluster, Nei Rin went to work.

Khat Lah was a warrior, not a shaper, and he didn't understand the details of what Nei Rin did next, but he knew the importance. The shaper retrieved a specialized memory qahsa from her robe, no larger than two fists, and attached it via umbilical to the exposed strand of the world brain's nervous system. She'd explained, without getting technical, that she was accessing the world brain's memory engrams and copying the information to her qahsa. How such a tiny device could store the memories of so great a creature, Khat Lah had no idea, but trusting Nei Rin was all he could do.

When he'd returned to Ossus after his last trip to Zonama Sekot, he'd craved a chance to redeem himself for his failure at Duro and, he admitted now, to make some small hero of himself. Heroism was vanity; in some ways, so was the need for redemption. The end to this was would not come from Khat Lah. He understood that. The end would come through Nei Rin, through the Jedi, through the Skywalkers, but if he could play his modest role in bringing about their victory- and with it, he firmly believed, the will of the Gods- then his self-exile from Zonama Sekot would be worthwhile.

Nei Rin's work seemed to be interminable. Wind and rain still lashed at them, and Khat Lah repeatedly glanced above them to make sure the flyer was still holding position. When Nei Rin announced the process was almost complete, he allowed himself to feel relieved. A second later, as if intentionally timed, the world brain trembled so hard it nearly threw Khat Lah into the pool. He staggered, held on to Nei Rin by the shoulders, and asked, "Is the world brain waking?"

"The anesthesia should have disabled it for longer," Nei Rin scowled.

Khat Lah saw a tentacle rise, then fall back into the pool. "It *is* waking."

"I don't understand, I-" Nei Rin cut herself off.

"Can we leave?"

Another tentacle rose up and splashed hard into the pool. A wave of green-brown muck washed across them both, soaking their clothes and filling Khat Lah's mouth with its putrid taste. The thick eyestalk began to tremble as life came back to it.

"We must leave now!" Khat Lah bellowed and waved the flyer closer.

He expected Nei Rin to protest, but she did not. The shaper began extracting her qahsa's umbilical from the world brain's nervous system. Khat Lah kept his attention skyward; he could see Vua Yaght holding the cable as steady as he could while the flyer dipped a little lower.

Nei Rin slung her qahsa into a sling around her chest and announced she was ready to go. Khat Lah pushed her up onto the vine and watched the shaper ascend as quickly as any warrior could. As she climbed the world brain shifted yet again, more violently than before. Khat Lah knew a great wave was coming and jumped high, grabbing the vine and pulling himself up in Nei Rin's wake. Brackish water splashed around the place where he'd stood. His weight made the vine sway but the shaper continued to pull herself up. Khat Lah looked down, saw the eye nictating faster and the tentacles swirling the waters, gathering strength to strike.

Then someone grabbed his forearm. He looked up; Nei Rin had already crawled through the portal and Vua Yaght was reaching out to haul him in. Khat Lah hurried up the last bit of vine and let Vua Yaght pulled him inside the ship. The other warrior bellowed to the cockpit, and Besh Lah pulled them skyward just as the first tentacles began to lash skyward.

"Should have sedated it.... Longer...." Nei Rin panted; the climb had left her as exhausted as Khat Lah had ever seen her.

“Did we get what we came for?” he asked sharply.

She blinked, nodded. He felt relief fill him; relief for survival, relief for success. Without the latter, the former meant nothing.

“Now we can learn what *really* went wrong,” Nei Rin said, stroking her qahsa. “Now we can set things right.”

They said war had no winners, but the orbital repair yards at Rendili argued otherwise. At the start of hostilities with the Empire, the corporate conglomerate managing Rendili contracted with the Alliance to serve as a primary repair and supply depot. They were paid well for their services, and Rendili’s struggling starship manufacturing facilities had been rebuilt and expanded to meet the demand. The planet hadn’t had it this good in a century.

If he thought about it too much, Jaius Yorub got cynical. Thankfully, as captain of *Indomitable* and chief administrative officer of the Fifth Fleet, he had plenty of other things to do. The Rendili yard crews were hard at work giving much-needed repairs to Stazi and Lekhwash’s task forces after the battle, and Yorub had to oversee everything. He was in the middle of haranguing Rendili authorities over schedule slips when he got a comm saying that Admiral Stazi had returned from his meeting on Lekhwash’s *Krakana*.

Rather than meet the admiral in the hangar, as was customary, Yorub finished his business before going up to find Stazi in his office. After he gave the admiral a status report he paused for a moment, then asked, “How did the meeting with the supreme commander go?”

“It went,” Stazi said. He seemed unusually tired and slumped in the seat behind his desk. “What you’ve heard about Botajef is true. The Mandalorians pulled out in the middle of the fight and have declared themselves neutral.”

Yorub had never liked relying on the brutish mercenaries, but they’d been useful in several critical fights. “We still took out an Imperial fleet and captured an admiral. It may not *feel* like a win, but I dare say it is, sir.”

“I agree, but the triumvirate is balking at another advance. Lekhwash has been calculating what the loss of the Manda-

lorians does to our forces. He's redistributed part of the Second Fleet along the Imperial line."

"What about the offensive planned for Ord Lithone?"

"Still uncertain. The triumvirate is breathing hard down his neck. Losing Botajef and the Mandos spooked them."

"Lekhwash is bold, sir. He's gotten what he's wanted from the triumvirs before."

"Yes, but he's also not foolish. The triumvirs are *right* to hesitate. And if we didn't see Botajef coming, the Imps might have other surprises for us."

Stazi was sounding uncharacteristically timid as well. "The Imperials don't have the manpower for a major push. They just don't. If we don't proceed with our advance.... This war could drag on in a stalemate."

"I agree. We need a *real* victory. And Lekhwash is eyeing possibilities. However--"

There was a buzzing from the door. Stazi tapped a button on his desk to open it. An aged Nautolan with green-blue skin and large black eyes stepped inside. Jedi Master Ayen Qemar wore the dowdy brown robes of her order and kept her lightsaber dangling from her belt. Yorub knew that the robes and silver cylinder were the Jedi equivalent of uniform and standard-issue sidearm; still, whenever he saw Jedi on *Indomitable* they struck him as out-of-place for a military environment. Though Stazi didn't say it, he knew the admiral felt the same way.

A little lazily, the Duros rose to his feet. "Greetings, Master Qemar."

"Greetings to *you*, Admiral. And you, Captain Yorub." The Jedi gave a brief bow. "I've received word that my unit is being recalled to Coruscant."

"That's right," Stazi nodded. "I was in a meeting with Admiral Lekhwash and Master Lowbacca just an hour ago."

"We haven't received new assignments yet. But should you feel it appropriate, we'd be pleased to fight in your service again."

"I will keep that in mind. Thank you for your service, Master."

Qemar bowed again. "And you for yours, Admiral."

The Jedi removed herself. Stazi dropped back into his chair, looking tired again.

"I *am* glad they're with us," Yorub said. "Just like I'm glad we're *not* fighting any of those Imperial Knights."

"Yes, Emperor Fel did us a favor by staying their hands," Stazi said. "Though the triumvirs are afraid he'll unleash them if he gets desperate. Another reason for caution."

Yorub nodded; with the Jedi involved he was a little surprised Fel wasn't using his own Force-users. Master Qemar had said that Fel wanted to avoid direct confrontation between his Knights and the Jedi. For once Yorub didn't mind the inscrutable relations between Force-using sects.

"If we *are* going through with the offensive, the Jedi will be key," Stazi added.

"What about us, sir? Are we going back to the front lines after the beating we took?"

"I told Lekhwash we'd be battle-ready in two standard weeks."

Not what Yorub wanted to hear, especially after the schedule-slips he'd been taking to Rendili about all day. He'd learned there was an art to time management. Always estimate more time than you'll probably need; if you finish early you'll look like a genius, and if things get delayed a little, you'll have wriggle room. Stazi, alas, hadn't learned that.

But because he was captain and Stazi his admiral, Yorub said, "We can do two weeks, sir."

"Glad to hear it." The Duro smiled faintly. "The war seems to be at a tipping point. It could settle into a long stalemant. Or we may push ahead, break Imperial lines, and start taking their systems. We must be prepared for anything."

The two ships clinging together in space made an unlikely pair. One was a rugged light freighter, its ovoid gray hull worn by decades of flight. The other was a scarlet armored *Sigma*-class shuttle renowned for use by Roan Fel's Imperial Knights. They were joined by ventral airlocks and drifted belly-to-belly through the void, millions of kilometers from any star system.

Nat Skywalker had made it a point to travel to the rendezvous in the most unremarkable ship he had available, but his counterpart had no such qualms about announcing his identity. Nat supposed it was understandable. The desolate corner of space through which they drifted was technically behind Imperial lines, though there wasn't a star destroyer for dozens of parsecs.

The Imperial Knight who came through the airlock into the hold of Nat's ship still kept a powerful athletic build, even though time had turned the black in his beard to gray and was doing the same to the rest of hair. Nat couldn't brag about keeping his youthful appearance either, but on his rare meetings with Treis Sinda his mind always jerked back twenty-eight years ago, to when they'd first met. They'd been mere teenagers, apprentice Jedi and apprentice Imperial Knight, thrown together for the liberation of Hapes. Nat and Treis had killed a Sith Lord together, and while their sparse meetings since had never solidified into friendship, their early experience had bound them with a mutual respect. There wasn't much of that between Jedi and Imperials nowadays.

Nat greeted Treis with a firm handshake and ushered him into the freighter's lounge. Two glasses and a bottle of Johrian brandy were waiting. Nat poured some, and though the two men didn't toast, the clink of glasses and first mouthful of burning ale helped defuse the tension.

"As lovely as I remember," Treis whistled as he set the glass down.

"Glad I could jog your memory." Nat dropped into one cushioned seat. Treis took the other. "Well. How is the empress?"

"Recovering from her injuries," Treis said dryly.

"Good to know. How's the new Mandalore?"

Treis raised a grey brow but said nothing. Instead he took the bottle of brandy by the neck and poured himself another mouthful. He swallowed, scowled for the sting, and said, "You get right to the point."

"I figured that's why you called for the meeting." It was only the third time they'd rendezvoused since the war began.

The first had come just two weeks after Ossus. The second had come after Admiral Lekhwash stopped the Imps' major push at Corulag. Aside from Nat and Treis, the only people who knew about these meetings were Kol Skywalker and Roan Fel.

"What happened at Botajef... was unexpected," Treis said.

Nat frowned. "What do you mean? You're saying you *didn't* buy off those Mandos and have them withdraw?"

"Not directly. The Emperor was caught totally off-guard when it happened."

According to Sinde, Roan Fel had also been caught-off guard by his own moff council and then his own allies. The Force told him that Treis believed that; even if it was true it gave Nat no solace. It only supported Kol's theory that there was some sinister hand behind all of this.

"So what *did* happen at Botajef?" asked Nat.

"Exactly what you heard. Chernan Ordo was killed. Yaga Auchs, one of his chief lieutenants, took over mid-battle."

"Strange lieutenant if he doesn't honor his predecessor's commitments." Treis grunted agreement. "Was Yaga Auchs bought off?"

"Shortly after the battle, one of our deputy intelligence directors claimed credit for Auchs withdrawal."

"A deputy intel director? Can I get a name?"

"Moff Nyna Calixte."

Nat frowned. He'd never heard of her before, not that he could recall, though he'd never followed Bastion politics too closely. Still, it tugged on memory, like he *should* have known it for some reason. "What did this moff say exactly? Did she pay Auchs with withdraw? Did she pay him to off his boss too?"

"That's unclear."

"Your boss is the damned emperor. Can't he get the truth from Moff- what was it?"

"Calixte. She says she approached him right before the battle with an offer of payment if he removed his troops from Botajef. She says she left the specifics purposely vague."

"And are you going to offer *more* credits to get the Mandos on your side?"

Treis shook his head. "Relying on mercenaries wouldn't be good for our morale. You never know when they'll be bought out by the other side."

"Well. I can't argue there." Nat took the bottle and poured a little more brandy, but didn't drink. "So you think something's up with Calixte."

"Some of her activities have been... suspicious. We've been investigating her quietly, and we'll investigate this."

"But you want Jedi help?"

"The Jedi have connections on Mandalore. Don't you?" Treis took a sip, but his eyes held Nat's over the rim of his glass.

Nat hesitated to reply. Treis knew about Marin; she'd donned scarlet *beskar* for the liberation of Hapes. She'd been Marin Fel then, still a Jedi, and she'd tried very hard for three decades to separate that life from Marin Solo's. Nat reached tentatively through the Force; he felt curiosity from Treis, even suspicion, but not certainty.

"I think what we can do there is limited," Nat said truthfully. Even if Marin did agree to scope things on Mandalore- and he knew she wouldn't- the Skirata family was no friend of Yaga Auchs.

"Anything you can do would be extremely helpful," Treis pressed. "The emperor is willing to work directly with the Jedi on this."

"Directly?"

"And quietly."

"I can make quiet inquiries. But I wouldn't get your hopes up."

"Very well. I understand." Treis's said, a touch bitter.

"Is there anything *else* we can help with?"

"That depends. Have you made any progress finding out who *really* despoiled those worlds?"

"I don't think so."

"And your Vong shapers haven't come up with a way to undo the damage."

"It's rather hard when all those worlds joined the Empire."

"Stang it, Skywalker, what you have been *doing* the past year? Not front-line duty, not you."

Building a hidden temple, but he wasn't telling an Imperial that. "I've been doing my part."

"I guess I'll take your word for that." Treis downed the last of his brandy and set the cup down noisily on the table.

"I'm sorry if you've come all this way for nothing," Nat said.

Treis looked at his glass, as though wishing there was more, but didn't reach for the bottle. "This war is going to drag on, you know. If the Alliance *does* push into our systems, it's all the more reason for us to keep fighting. And if the Alliance thinks they have the upper hand, they won't sue for peace either."

"I know."

"The only way this war ends is by uncovering the reason it started in the first place. The Emperor is doing everything in his power to find out."

Treis wasn't sure he agreed with that, but he said, "So are the Jedi."

He saw disbelief mirrored on Treis' face. The Imperial Knight pushed up from the table and said, "Until later, Skywalker."

Nat got up and saw him to the airlock. They parted without a handshake. Once his ship detached from the Imperial shuttle he went to the cockpit and watched the scarlet ship wink into hyperspace, leaving Nat alone in the void.

He walked back to the hold, where a little bit of Johrian brandy waited in his glass. He picked it up and finished in one gulp.

He wanted to trust Treis, to work closely with him and Roan Fel to end this conflict. He knew Kol wanted it even more. Yet it was precisely because of those high stakes that they couldn't share secrets except in small doses. Paranoia and suspicion had widened the gap between Force-users, and Nat sometimes wondered if that, too, hadn't been a goal of the Ossus Project's unseen saboteurs.

He thought back to Marin, who'd walked away. He'd been perplexed and disappointed all those years ago, but he understood in time. Being a Jedi carried heavy responsibilities; shouldering a legendary name and the blood of

Anakin Skywalker could feel downright crushing. Kol had adjusted to the weight easily at first, but since the Ossus Project's failure it had been grinding him as well.

Sometimes Nat envied Marin for the strength to leave. Sometimes he'd expressed to Droo his desire to do just that: marry her, move off Ossus, sever ties with the Jedi, live a normal life. But as a Jedi and a Skywalker there were always responsibilities, and even if he shirked under their weight Nat knew he'd feel a coward if he ran.

He sighed, walked back to the cockpit, and plotted a course back to Ossus. He was a Jedi and a Skywalker yet, and that meant there was so much left to do.

Chapter Thirteen

It was dawn, and the air smelled like smoke and blood. Slanting sunlight tinted red and ash drifted through the air like black snow. What had been a street was now a strip of land framed by scorched-black husks of buildings and littered with bodies. None bore the mark of a lethal blaster shot, as one would expect from such a scene. Some corpses lay whole, others in pieces.

Two figures walked through the carnage. The Blood Carver was almost three meters tall, with black tattoos cutting elaborate shapes on his golden skin. Beside Darth Vorkan walked the white-skinned warrior who'd once been called Relik K'sharn, warlord of the Nagai.

He was no longer Relik K'sharn, but the nameless Sith apprentice was still a lord of war.

This slaughter was his doing more than anyone's, and he took pride in that. He'd not just danced through the settlement's streets, dealing death to countless beings with his lightsaber, though he'd done that, as had Darth Vorkan and a dozen other lord and apprentices of the One Sith. He'd designed the plan of attack as well, one that allowed a mere fourteen Sith to overcome and destroy an entire town with no losses to themselves. He'd waged far larger fights when leading the Nagai against more powerful and advanced enemies, but he'd never felt such mastery until today. By drawing on his own talents and fueling them with the dark side of the Force he'd reached intoxication he'd never thought possible.

The planet was called Soulllex, a desolate world on the Outer Rim, barely populated and quietly settled a few generations back, by members of a Jedi splinter sect called Jensaarai. Since starting the war between the Empire and Alliance, the Sith had been quietly seeking out other Force-using groups. Those Lord Krayt deemed as sufficiently threatening were eliminated. It was the Dark Lord's aim that, when he finally executed his purge of the Jedi, they'd have no hidden allies to run to.

These Jensaarai had been influenced by the Sith during the Clone Wars but the rebuilt Jedi Order had gradually been bringing some of them into the fold. Nonetheless, they were a separate and private organization, and for years they'd made Soulllex their center of learning.

That was over now. When Vorkan and his apprentice had arrived they'd made a simple demand: surrender to the leadership of the One Sith, or die. Those who didn't wish to perish had been encouraged to leave the settlement and join the Sith gathered at their landed ship a kilometer away. A handful of Jensaarai, mostly the young or bold or curious, had done so. The rest had gathered into the city to make a stand. They'd tried to send a comm signal across the stars to their distant Jedi cousins, but a Sith frigate in orbit had jammed the transmission.

The other Jensaarai had stood to fight, and so they'd died. Though their order had dabbled in the dark side, their power had been diluted by Jedi teachings. Even their best fighters had been no match for Darth Vorkan and his apprentice.

As he surveyed the ruins, startlingly vivid in the fresh red light, Darth Vorkan said, "When we leave this place, I'll order the warship to raze it from orbit. No trace of our work will remain."

"Do you believe the Jedi felt this in the Force?" the Nagai asked.

"They may, and if so, they'll come to investigate."

"Then we aren't yet ready to reveal ourselves."

"Patience, apprentice. Our time will come. I promise you."

"And mine?"

Vorkan stopped and looked into the Nagai's eyes. They were a bright red-gold, an undeniable mark of the dark side power he'd embraced. "Your work here was excellent. One day, you will make an excellent Fist for Darth Krayt."

"But I am not a Sith Lord *yet*." His pointed teeth locked together. "Even after today."

"Patience is not only for Jedi."

"What more do you *want* from me?"

"That is for you to learn, in time."

"But not now."

"Soon. Lord Krayt promises it will be soon."

"Then I'll be patient, if Lord Krayt wishes." His tone bled distrust.

Vorkan looked down at him. "Don't think I'm *afraid* of you, apprentice. I am Lord Krayt's Hand. You will be Fist, in time. We're rivals for nothing."

The Nagai sucked in breath. "Of course. Such rivalry is... not the way of the One Sith."

"I'm glad we understand each other." Vorkan looked at the bodies, the back ruins, the drifting ash. "We have been assigned a new mission, together."

"What kind of mission?"

"Nothing as challenging as this, I'm afraid. But perhaps just as important. Let us head back to the ship. I will explain everything on the way."

The past year had taken visible toll on Roan Fel, deepening the scowl-lines on his face and the furrows on his brow. They seemed deeper still after his wife's near-capture and serious injury. The fact that she was recovering perfectly in Bastions' most elite medical center relieved Eshkar Niin greatly, but that didn't seem to pass on to his emperor.

Fel had summoned Niin and Draco to his inner sanctum, and they walked through the winding paths of a greenhouse garden bright with midday light. It was winter season at Ravelin, but the sky was cloudless and the sun warmed the damp air and brought faint sweat to Niin's hairless forehead.

"It's a relief to be rid of the Mandalorian threat," Fel was saying. "But it's not a gift I can trust. Calixte may have

overplayed her hand in this, which we might turn to our advantage.”

“You don’t believe her version of things,” Niin said simply. In between guarding the empress and other missions, he and Draco had been investigating the deputy intelligence director for the past year. There were certainly unusual things about her: communiques from unknown senders which had dropped off right as the investigation began, and scraps of personal history that were impossible to verify. Nonetheless, they’d failed to find anything outright culpable.

“I know you’ve checked her financial accounts, and I know it looks legitimate,” Fel said. “But it would if she were careful, and we know she is. No, this is something we need to look at on the ground-level.”

“You wish us to go the Mandalore, Majesty?” asked Draco.

“Yes.” Fel looked them both over. “I’m not expecting you to pose as mercenaries. But the key to this is Yaga Auchs. Try to gain audience with him if you can, or his lieutenants. We need to find who *really* bought their allegiance.”

“Why are you sure it *wasn’t* Calixte?” Draco frowned.

“It may have been,” Fel admitted, “But this came so suddenly, and not through proper channels. She’s normally more careful than that. I feel she’s taking credit for actions by her allies. She’s an ambitious woman, after all.”

“You *feel* it, sir?” said Niin. “Is the Force telling you?”

“For the moment it’s only a guess, but it’s our best chance to investigate Calixte since the war began.”

“I understand, but as you say, Majesty, we’re not mercenaries. They’ll know us for outsiders and that will limit what we can do.”

“I know. You’ll need help on this mission, and I believe I know someone who can provide it. I’ve sent Master Sinde to elicit support. He was unsuccessful, which means we’ll have to use a more direct approach.”

“What does that mean, sir?”

“It means pack your things and get ready. We lift off Bastion in three hours.”

“*We*, Majesty?” Draco stared.

“Yes, we,” Fel nodded. “The empress is entirely capable of running affairs while I’m gone. I’m sending Mohrgan and my body double on a trip to the front lines. Admiral Kaylac will make sure they’re quite visible.”

It was known to only the Emperor’s most trusted allies that a skilled actor had been hired and cosmetically altered to act as Fel’s stand-in for cases like this. “Not that I question Your Majesty’s judgment,” Niin said, “But is your presence really necessary?”

“For this, it will be,” Fel said, and nothing else. Niin knew he’s reveal nothing else, and it frustrated him, but he was an Imperial Knight and he accepted his master’s order with a short, simple nod.

“Come, apprentice,” he told Draco. “We’d best get ready.”

By the time Nyna Calixte returned to her apartment after her meeting with Director Seniac, the sun had gone down over Ravelin and the last bits of twilight dimmed against the city’s bright skyline. It had been a long meeting to finish a day of meetings as the Imperial war machine struggled to realign itself to face this new phase of fighting.

When she stepped inside, Calixte undid the bun in her hair, shook it to her shoulders, and walked tiredly through the living room without turning on the lights. She got halfway to her bedroom when she noticed a humanoid figure silhouetted against the main window. She jumped and reached for her belt, but she had no weapon.

“Lights!” she called.

In the split-second it took to illuminate the living room, Calixte realized who it must have been, and was unsurprised to see light fall on scarlet Devaronian woman long black hair in a topknot.

Calixte sucked in breath. “Good evening. You should have called ahead.”

It was a flippant remark, one Maladi didn’t deign to answer. The Sith only spoke to Calixte in person now. Comms were no longer safe. Calixte realized at the war’s start that she was under observation. Someone was accessing her call logs, poking around her bank accounts, looking for holes in the

carefully-constructed backstory she'd made for herself. She thought it was Fel and Knights, but she wasn't positive. Nobody had moved against her yet, but she couldn't risk anything. She and Maladi only spoke in-person, usually in her quarters, always unannounced.

"I swept the room for listening devices," said Maladi.

"I do that daily," Calixte said, defensive.

"You were away for most of the day. Your quarters could have been accessed." Maladi took two steps toward her and ran light fingertips on the felt back of a sofa. "But they were not. We can speak freely."

Calixte crossed her arms. "About what?"

"You know what. Does Fel buy your story?"

"You mean that I acted on my own initiative and bought out Yaga Auchs? He seems to believe it. I wish you'd told me further in advance. I could have used time to make it more convincing."

"The decision was made on short-notice," Maladi shrugged. "What did you tell them about the money?"

"I said I withdrew from a private account to pay Auchs. I *did* take money from it and shifted it to another account. I'm sure they're checking on it. They should only see the withdrawal."

"Good."

"You should have told me. I could have made contact with Auchs myself and paid him with Imperial credits. It would make the whole thing watertight."

"As I said, it was a short-notice decision. And Auchs would have requested a much higher fee from your agents than mine."

Calixte raised a brow. "Why is that?"

"The Auchs family and the Sith have a history. So do the Auchs and the Jedi- a much less cordial one."

"I'd never heard about that." She knew Yaga Auchs' uncle had been Mandalore decades ago. He was thought to have been captured and executed by the Chiss.

"The specifics need not concern you. Suffice to say, Yaga Auchs was happy to assist us."

"And your Sith agents assisted him?"

"We are helping him secure leadership on Mandalore."

"Eliminate rivals, you mean?"

"Precisely."

It made sense, but Calixte still wished she'd been able to work with Auchs directly. She had only a vague understanding of Maladi's network of agents. The Devaronian was the only Sith she'd met, and for all Calixte knew she was the only Sith at all, despite statements to the contrary.

A year into their partnership, there was still too much Calixte disliked about it.

"Fel may send agents of his own to Mandalore," Calixte said. "Auchs needs to be ready for that."

"He will be."

"Do you plan on bringing the Mandalorians into the war on our side? Or will you keep them out?"

"For now, they'll stay neutral."

Calixte nodded. Relying on mercenaries had many pitfalls, as the Alliance had just found out.

"Our main concern is the scope of the larger war," Maladi continued. "You've been in high-level meetings all day. What do you have to tell me?"

In the beginning, Calixte had been loath to give scraps of Imperial strategy to this witch. She still didn't like it, and she still didn't trust Maladi, but she no longer believed the Sith would undermine the war against the Alliance. "The loss of Admiral Reave was a major blow. Fleet command has been re-distributing ships and allocating resources. They won't be ready for a new offensive for at least two weeks, maybe longer. We're not sure what the Alliance's next step is."

"You're on the back foot."

"Yes. We are." Calixte let anger into her voice. "Frankly, I was hoping the Sith would do more in this war. The Jedi have been on the front lines, tipping battle after battle in the Alliance's favor."

"I hardly think Roan Fel would welcome us in his armies."

"No, but Sith are supposed to strike from the shadows. The Alliance has us outmanned, outgunned, and frankly, their strategy has been superior also. Admiral Lekhwash is bolder than we anticipated."

She stopped short of saying this war had been a mistake. She'd wanted it because she'd wanted Imperial supremacy and personal advancement. Now it looked as though the Empire might do down, and she'd go with it. It was, she sometimes thought, the fate she'd deserve for allowing herself to be conned by a Sith.

"Where is Admiral Kaylac in all this?" asked Maladi.

Calixte snorted. The Empire's supreme commander was a competent administrator but his strategy had been too conservative against Lekhwash's aggressive defense. "He plans to move *Invincible* forward to Bilbringi. That should forestall an Alliance counterattack." So they hoped.

Maladi looked thoughtful. At eighteen kilometers long, the super star destroyer *Invincible* was the mightiest warship in the galaxy. It was also forty years old and showing its age, which was why Kaylac had mostly kept it in reserve, using it to defend key systems rather than spearhead attacks. Veed had been pressing him to go on the offensive with it, and for the first time Roan Fel was starting to nudge him in that direction too. As yet, however, no battle plan using *Invincible* had been drawn.

"The Sith will act, and soon," Maladi said.

That was too ambiguous for Calixte. "Act how? By doing what? This partnership will be better- and safer- for us both if you'd *tell* me what I need to know."

"You are right. The war is tipping against the Empire. More aggressive action by the Sith will be needed, but that risks revealing ourselves to the Jedi. And when *that* happens, the war will truly change. My master will have to agree to it."

Calixte's lips pressed tight. If the Sith did get openly involved, it would hasten a collision with Fel and, worse, the Jedi. But she'd faced this problem before, at the war's beginning. She'd delayed that reckoning; she wasn't sure if she could do it again, but there was no choice but to try. The moment she'd made pact with the Sith, without even knowing it, she'd set herself on this course.

"Tell your master we have to move forward," Calixte said. "We've walked too far along this road to turn back now."

It was truer than Maladi could ever know.

Getting back to her family after the stop at Taivas was more of a hassle than Marin anticipated. When she was halfway there Benet hailed her to say they'd been contacted by a new client who wanted them to pick up some cargo in the Vandelhelm system. This new client had a tight timetable, so *Fast Start* had already left the Javin system, which meant Marin had to course-correct and make her way to Vandelhelm along the Rimma, which added another thirty hours to her trip. By the time *Runaround* dropped out of hyperspace she was more than ready to be free of the shuttle. When her broad, spacious cargo hauler came into view her heart swelled.

She tapped on her ship's comm system and said, "Hailing *Fast Start*. Open the bay doors, please, I'm coming in for landing."

She waited almost thirty seconds before she heard Benet's voice. "Opening now."

The line clicked off after that. She fought a frown; her husband wasn't messy with his affections but he wasn't normally so succinct, especially when they'd been apart for over a week. She immediately wondered if something was wrong with Ania and raised a hand to tap the comm back on, then drew it away. One way or another, she'd find out in a minute.

The ventral doors to *Fast Start*'s cargo bay slid open. Marin killed engines and used repulsors to nudge her shuttle inside the larger ship. She waited until the metal doors grinded shut to extend landing gear and lower herself to the flight deck. Neither Benet nor Ania were waiting for her, though two of their astromech droids sat lazily near one wall.

Marin unbuckled from her pilot's seat and headed down the lowered landing ramp. Still no warm bodies to greet her. She reached for her short-range pocket comlink and was about to call Benet when the door on the far side the hangar slid open.

The sight made her freeze in pure shock: two figures in the inimitable scarlet armor of Imperial Knights walked on either

side of a man in gold and violet robes. The man in the middle came toward Marin with absolute assurance in his stride, and gleam from the overhead lights flashed the white streak through his hair.

It was Marin's first time seeing her sole surviving cousin, Emperor Roan Fel, in almost thirty years. The first thing she said to him was, "What the hell did you do to my family?"

That elicited visible shock from the two Imperial Knights: one young human, an older Iktotchi. Roan, however, merely stopped in front of her and looked her over, down-up. Then he said, "They are unharmed and waiting for you in one of the crew lounges."

"I want to see them. *Now*."

"I'm sure that can be arranged." Fel side-stepped and gestured to the door.

Marin slipped between him and Iktotchi and hurried down the hall. She almost ran, but when she got to the lift tube Roan and his Knights were still with her.

"Two levels up," the emperor said helpfully.

The four of them rode the tube in tense silence. She had plenty of questions for Fel- how he found her, what he wanted, what the hell made him think he could take over her home and hold her family hostage- but she held them all in like she held her anger. When the door opened she stalked to the nearest lounge area. Benet and Ania were there. So were too more scarlet Knights.

Marin immediately dropped to her knees and gathered her daughter in a fierce hug. Ania hugged her back, and Benet said, "I'm sorry. I thought there were our new clients..."

Without releasing her daughter, Marin looked back at Roan. "That was your trap, wasn't it?"

The emperor simply nodded. "We have no desire to harm you, or your family." Unless Marin did what he said. Roan didn't have to speak that part.

"Mom, I don't understand," whimpered Ania.

Marin pulled back from her daughter, stroked her hair. "It's all right. It's nothing you need to be worried about."

"But... isn't that the *emperor*? What does the emperor want with us?"

"He doesn't want you. Just me."

"But why?"

Marin looked around the room: at Benet and Roan, who knew, and the four Knights, who watched with stony faces. If they didn't know her secret, she wasn't going to tell them.

"I'll explain later, sweetheart, I promise." Marin kissed Ania's forehead and stood up. She hugged Benet, kissed him too, then steeled herself and turned to the emperor. "Okay. Let's go somewhere private and talk. Just you and me."

"Please," her cousin said. "Lead the way."

She stepped into the corridor. Roan followed, with both his initial guards. Marin led them down the hall until they came to a doorway. She tapped it open, revealing an empty cabin for occasional passengers.

"You first," Marin said.

Roan nodded and stepped inside, but Marin saw his Knights glaring daggers at her. She ignored them and followed him into the room.

"They're not used to such... disrespect," Roan said after the door shut.

"You're not *my* emperor. You're only my cousin. Do they know that?"

Roan shook his head. She felt slightly relieved.

In truth, she didn't know her cousin well. When the Jedi and Imperial Knights had parted ways and her father had taken her from Bastion she'd been fourteen, Roan merely seven. When they'd reunited as young adults they'd had bigger things to worry about than each other. Now they stood in the cramped cabin, facing off: emperor of one-quarter the known galaxy- or something- and a freighter pilot. And between them: Vitor Fel, dissolved into the Force.

"How did you find me?" she asked. If the Empire knew about her they might know even about Taivas and the hidden temple.

"We've kept a loose eye on you for some time," Roan said coolly. "When I heard you left the Jedi Order, I had my agents try to find what had become of you. It took years before they noticed a business registered to Marin Solo. Using our grandmother's surname was a little obvious."

"And just now, after all this time, you drop in to say hello. I've worked very, very hard to live a *private* life. Not a Jedi, not a Mando, not a Fel. I don't want that ruined."

"It's not my intention to ruin anything."

"Then why take my family hostage?"

"They're not hostages. We were merely waiting for your arrival. I wrongly assumed you'd be with your freighter."

"I was doing a side trip."

She prayed he was telling the truth; if so, the hidden temple was probably safe. Shock and anger faded just a little, and she realized for the first time how incredible it was that the leader of the Empire would travel halfway across the galaxy-into Alliance territory, in the middle of a war- just to talk to her.

She crossed her arms and regarded him. There didn't seem much left of the boy she'd known. She'd seen him in plenty of news holos, but he looked older in person. He looked tired. "What are you here for, Roan?"

"I require your help."

"I'm no Jedi. I haven't used the Force in years."

"This requires your *other* connections."

She frowned. "I'm no Mando either."

"But you keep in contact with your mother. Her clan."

"Sometimes. Didn't you just buy out the new *Mand'alor*? What do you need me for?"

"*Someone* bought out Yaga Auch's. It was not me. One of my moffs claimed she was responsible, after the deed was done, but her superiors had no knowledge."

Marin imagined an emperor wouldn't like dangling questions, but it still seemed small reason to personally hunt her down. "What else?"

"I suspect the moff in question is involved with other agents, unknown ones, who've conspired to bring a war between the Empire and the Alliance. For *all* our sakes, I need to uncover the truth."

His voice cracked just a little as he said it. He kept up that regal persona, even in private, but she could see the weakness there, the doubt. He was emperor of one-third of the known galaxy, but he was a man pressed in on all sides,

trapped in a situation beyond his control and ashamed to be there at all.

She didn't need Force intuition to read that. She knew it because she knew what Roan Fel had been. A younger brother, a junior prince, he'd assumed for his first seventeen years that his older brother would inherit the Empire and groped for some other role, he didn't know what. Then he'd lost his father and brother on the same day and suddenly had the weight of an empire on his shoulders. All his life he'd been trying to prove to himself he could honor them, and that was a hard burden to carry.

But that didn't mean he could seize her ship and threaten her family. "I don't know what you think I can do. There's bad blood between my family and Auchs. Very bad."

"Then they'd know Auchs' enemies."

"Maybe, but that's not my life anymore. Jedi, Mando, all of that, I'm done." Which was a lie; she hoped it passed.

"If we're to end this war we have to find out who started it," Roan insisted. "Billions of lives may hang in the balance. I'm asking for your help in saving them."

She regarded him carefully. "Is ending this war more important to you than winning it?"

He blinked, thought for a moment. "As long as it ends with honor." Honor meant a lot more for an Imperial monarch than a freighter captain. He saw that on her face and said, "All I want to do- all I've ever wanted to do as emperor- is honor my father and grandfather."

"And Vitor." Marin's voice was hoarse.

Roan nodded. That one got to her. Vitor, who'd seen his death coming through a Force vision and steeled himself for it. Vitor, who'd stood in front of a stabbing lightsaber to save Allana Solo Djo. Vitor would have done everything to stop this war. He'd have sacrificed everything.

Marin exhaled. "I may... still know people."

"Two of my best Knights stand outside this door. They will go with you to Mandalore to investigate."

"Even if I help you, I'm not your subject. You can't order me." She glared. "You're not holding my family hostage either."

"If you board a ship with my Knights, I will release them and let *Fast Start* go on its way."

"I want to talk to them. I want to see them jump away. And I want to search this whole ship for homing devices before I do *anything* for you."

Annoyance flashed on his face, but he reigned it in. "Very well. But we cannot delay too long. I have a war to run. And you have a war to end."

"I need to talk to my family first. Alone. None of your Knights."

"Of course." His expression softened. "Do they know what you are?"

"My husband does. My daughter doesn't know anything. She didn't, until now."

"From what little I saw, she seems quite... independent."

"She is," Marin said with pride. "You have one yourself, don't you?"

"Yes. I believe Marasiah is a few years older than your, ah..."

"Ania."

Roan nodded. He tapped the door controls and stepped through the open portal. Marin looked at the two Knights outside: the young human and the Iktotchi.

"Master Eshkar Niin and Antares Draco," Roan explained. "Captain Solo has agreed to help us on our mission."

"We are very grateful," said Niin, but Marin caught the curiosity in his eye. He didn't know why his emperor had dragged him halfway across the galaxy to hijack some middling cargo ship, but he had ideas.

Let him wonder, Marin thought. She wasn't going to let them intrude on the life she'd made, not any further. Not for the sake of the Empire or the galaxy or her dead cousin. She'd given up too much for them already.

Chapter Fourteen

War had hollowed out the Jedi Temple on Ossus. Per Kol Skywalker's decision, most of the Order was helping the Alliance in some capacity, whether they were acting as soldiers, healers, scouts, or spies. The Jedi had been scattered, and nowadays the place with the largest concentration of knights wasn't Ossus but Coruscant, where the Alliance government had helped refurbish the old temple Kol's great-grandfather Luke had established a century ago. Kol was there more often than not, constantly in contact with the Alliance leadership. It has been months since he'd come back to Ossus to see his mother, or his son.

As one of the most senior Jedi still at the ancient temple, Jade found herself master of empty halls and echoing rooms. It was often lonely, but she did not envy younger knights the battle. In her lifetime she'd seen more than enough of fighting and lost too many people she'd loved.

The young gave her solace. Jade watched them do their morning practice. Rather than use their lightsabers, Cade and his blue-skinned Twi'lek friend Shado Vao had picked up meter-long wooden poles for sparring. A small herd of apprentices had joined Jade to watch, ranging from teenagers like the red-haired Azlyn Rae to younger ones like Eli Horn. The apprentices on the training mat circled barefoot and cautious, moving not around each other but the figure in between them: a two-meter-tall Yuuzhan Vong warrior who grasped his own wooden pole with both hands.

Over the past year, Jade had watched her grandson grow. Being away from his father, knowing his teachers were off at war, had sobered Cade, robbing him of the reckless good cheer he'd had before. As he grew more serious his body grew up too. He must have sprouted several centimeters in the past year, putting him clearly above Jade's own height. His lengthening limbs were acquiring visible knots of muscle and his face had shed the last bits of youthful plumpness to become more angular and hard.

Despite that, Cade normally enjoyed these sparring matches with Shado and the other apprentices. This time, though, he bled anxiety. Jade could understand why. Invisible in the Force, Khat Lah gave no hints to his intentions. He simply lashed out, fast and strong, forcing Cade and Shado into one defensive block after another. Any time the boys did lash out at him, the Yuuzhan Vong would deflect them easily. He had longer limbs, stronger arms, sharper reflexes. Apprentices trained against droids sometimes, and while those too were invisible in the Force, even the best ones lacked the unpredictability of a flesh-and-bone warrior like Khat Lah.

The Jedi apprentices had to coordinate. As she watched, Jade could feel Cade and Shado's minds touch. They spaced out so Khat Lah was directly between them, and the Yuuzhan Vong had to constantly shift his gaze back and forth to keep track of them both. Khat Lah kept backstepping, trying to get both apprentices in view at once, but they refused him.

Jade felt a message pass from Cade to Shado: *You go low, I'll go high.*

And though none of it showed on Shado's face, the Twi'lek sent back: *One... two... three...*

They moved as one, as perfectly in sync as true Jedi Knights. Khat Lah was ready for them. The tall warrior jumped high over Shado's low strike, landed two foot-spaces back, and swung his pole around so hard it knocked Cade's out of his hand. The blonde boy yelped as his weapon went flying. Shado recovered balance and tried to hit Khat Lah up close, but the Yuuzhan Vong swept a foot out, taking the Twi'lek's legs out beneath him and dropping him butt-first to the mat.

Cade was unarmed but not defeated. Jade felt a swell of pride. Her grandson didn't hesitate or pause in shock; he called on Shado's fallen and grabbed it with two hands as he lunged at Khat Lah from behind. The Yuuzhan Vong had seen the staff take to air; he pivoted, blocked Cade's swipe, then took a mighty swing himself that clashed against Cade's and forced the boy onto the back foot. Khat Lah tried another low kick but Cade backed away just in time to avoid. The Yuuzhan Vong went after him, attacking with blow after blow that Cade could barely push back. The boy was panting hard, visibly tired and clearly frustrated.

Even without the Force to tip her off, Jade could see what Khat Lah did next. He allowed his blows to become sloppy and wide, leaving holes for Cade to attack through. The boy, desperate for victory, couldn't resist the temptation and lunged forward. Khat Lah twisted his wrist and brought his staff's edge up, slamming hard into the boy's soft stomach. As the breath pumped out of him Cade keeled forward. The Yuuzhan Vong used his free hand to grab the throat of Cade's tunic, shoved him so far backward he lost balance, and finally let the apprentice drop onto the mat.

Cade and Shado both stayed where they were, lying face-up, sweating and gasping and wincing for their wounds. Khat Lah stood above them, staff still in hand. He'd barely broken a sweat.

Jade stepped onto the mat. "We have a saying about picking on someone your own size."

Khat Lah looked her up and down. "You are not my size."

"It wasn't an offer." She glanced at the apprentices. "Anything broken?"

"No, Master." Shado forced himself onto his elbows.

She looked at her grandson. "Cade?"

"I've felt better." He stayed on his back and stared at the ceiling lights. "But I'll be okay."

Jade looked at Khat Lah again. "You're a hard teacher."

"Pain is a valuable instructor," the Yuuzhan Vong said plainly. "And I did not damage them permanently."

"No, I think you've taught them a valuable lesson or two. Thank you, by the way, for volunteering to help train them."

"I appreciate the opportunity to help. Since we came back from Chasima... The master shaper has had little need of my skills."

Jade smiled faintly. Nei Rin, her assistant shapers, and some select Jedi scientists were hard at work in the private laboratory Kol had set up for them here, analyzing the data they'd collected from the world brain at Chasima. Khat Lah and his fellow warriors were left feeling useless and restless.

"That's actually why I came to see you," Jade said. "If you don't mind, can we talk in private?"

"I do not mind..." Khat Lah trailed off.

His eyes scanned the audience of younger apprentices and met Eli Horn's. During his sporadic time in the Temple this past year, the Yuuzhan Vong had devoted special attention to the late Reikar Horn's son. Jade knew why; she'd first met Khat Lah when he'd been shambling confused through the Temple halls, one hand around Eli's, after their disastrous escape from Duro. It was an interesting bond, but one Jade had refrained from mentioning to Eli's mother on Corellia, who'd reluctantly allowed her son to continue Jedi training.

Instead of the Horn boy, it was Azlyn Rae who interjected, "You can have him all you want, Master Skywalker. I think the rest of us need a break."

From the murmured assents, it was clear none of the other apprentices wanted to try their talents against the giant, Force-blinded warrior. As Jade led Khat Lah out of the sparring chamber she glanced back to see Azlyn grab Cade's hand, and pull the sheepishly smiling boy to his feet. That was another new development for Jade's grandson. She didn't know how serious it was, or where it would take them, but she was pleased to let it play out. Romantic tangles were what a boy Cade's age *should* be worrying about, not a war.

Jade led Khat Lah to one of the private meditation chambers that overlooked the Ossus landscape. She still wasn't used to how lush and green things had become. Once they were alone she said, "Are your companions also training Jedi?"

Khat Lah shook his head. "Besh Lah and Vua Yaght train with each other."

"But you volunteered to test my apprentices." Jade crossed arms over her chest. "I'm grateful for that. I was just wondering why."

Khat Lah hesitated, looked away. A small part of Jade was pleased she could intimidate this massive warrior. Eventually he said, "I owe a debt to the *Jeedai*. All of my race does. And, personally, I owe a debt to Reikar Horn I can never repay. Those two debts... they bring each other into focus."

"I think I see what you mean. I was wondering if your religion had anything to do with it. You *are* part of the Ganner Sect."

"The *Jeedai* redeemed our race by revealing our false gods for what they were. Those of us who revere the Ganner over Yun-Yammka recognize that more than most."

"Would you say you worship the Jedi?"

Again he hesitated. "We *revere* you, as I said. Perhaps we worship. You must understand, in touching the Force you *Jeedai* do things no Yuuzhan Vong could ever do. You tell us that once we could, untold generations ago, before the original Yuuzhan'tar stripped us of our ability to use the Force."

Even after spending years of her life on Zonama Sekot, among other Yuuzhan Vong, the ways of the planet and the race were still fully beyond her ken. Jade wondered how Khat Lah would react if she admitted it.

The warrior thought again, then took a deep breath as though steeling himself. "If I were to express my feelings toward the *Jeedai* with any words, I would say... it is *envy*."

She hadn't expected that. "You wish you could use our powers?"

"I wish I could *feel* the Force as you do. Some priests say the Force is the breath of Yun-Yuuzhan. Other say it's how the Gods choose to manifest themselves to those they've not forsaken. To use your powers, that would be even greater. But I would be content with knowing the Force exists, and feeling it inside me." He tapped his chest.

Jade considered. She had no reason to doubt the honesty of Khat Lah's words, and he'd proven his bravery time and again over the past year. Still, she'd never worked with him

closely on a mission. He'd mostly accompanied Nei Rin, who probably understood him better than Jade ever could.

Well, there had to be a first time for everything. She said, "I'd like for you to go offworld with me. Your two companions can come also."

"Where are we going?"

Jade drew in deep breath. "Last night I *felt* something in the Force. I wish you could understand this fully, but it was like I was feeling someone else's pain as deeply and vividly as my own. It only lasted a minute, but it was agony."

Khat Lah frowned. "Whose pain did you feel?"

"I'm not positive, but I'm pretty sure it was more than one person. Likely it was *many* more. Other Jedi felt it too, mostly the older masters. We've spent all night checking with the Jedi off fighting, and we've been able to account for everyone. But we still believe some Force-users, somewhere, suffered something terrible enough to send ripples of their pain through the Force.."

"Force-users, but not *Jeedai*? I have... heard there were other such sects."

"There's quite a few, actually." Jade smiled thinly. "Not even Jedi have a monopoly on truth."

Khat Lah looked slightly troubled by the prospect. "You wish us to help search for these Force-users? I would be willing. I believe Vua Yaght and Besh Lah would too. But the master shaper--"

"Has already been informed, and she's given get approval."

"Ah." He paused. "Will other *Jeedai* come with us?"

"Some Jedi are already looking, including my son Nat. The Jedi Order keeps in contact with some of these other schools, and we'll check with them first."

"Are you afraid the Imperials or their allies are hunting other Force-users?"

"I honestly don't know. But we need to be prepared for anything."

"I will protect you, Jade Skywalker." He did a Yuuzhan Vong salute, forearms crossed, fists to opposite shoulders. "I swear it on my life."

She allowed another little smile. "Good to hear it. But if something bad happens, and I tell *you* to run, then you run, no matter what? Got it?"

Visibly reluctant, he said, "I swear it. Where do we begin?"

"I've got a list of several planets to check. It will take some travel time, but that's all right. Maybe I can think of some unorthodox training to give *you*."

Mandalore was a planet that periodically played a big role in galactic affairs, but it didn't look it. The cities seemed antique and the vast majority of its terrain was unsettled wilderness. It was, therefore, an easy place to hide if you didn't want to be found. Back when Marin had made semi-frequent trips to see her mother and cousins on Mandalore, the Skirata clan had claimed a hamlet along a mountain ridge in the northern hemisphere, far from Keldabe or any of the other urban areas. She knew they remained there for decades, but once Yaga Auchs declared himself *Mand'ador* they'd packed everything worthwhile into a handful of ships and moved from Kyrimorut to a new encampment in a vast forested area in the south. According to Tamar, they'd done it all in less than two days.

It had been a big scrambling step for what was, ultimately, a precaution. Auchs hadn't indicated any move against the clan that had killed his father and uncle, not yet. He was busy in Keldabe subduing more feisty rivals for the *Mand'ador* helm, but once that was done he'd likely get to the Skiratas. It was better for the Skiratas to move first.

The two Imperial Knights sat with Marin inside the hold of her uncle's ship, a battered and heavily modified freighter called the *Bottom Line*, listening to all the jumbled gossip. After taking *Runaround* to Mandalore, they'd set down in a clearing fifteen minutes away, after which the ship had promptly been covered by a sensor-scrambling camo net just like the *Bottom Line*. For the following two hours they'd been regaled with stories about Auchs' seizure of power and resistance to it. The Skiratas talked freely to the prodigal and her strange companions, but their eyes lingered with suspicion on Niin and Draco.

After hearing about how some of Auchs' potential rivals were disappearing or renouncing their ambitions without warning, the Iktotchi interjected, "Does anyone know for certain *how* Chernan Ordo was killed?"

"There's rumors, of course," said Jind Skirata. He was a little younger than Marin and had grown a bushy black-and-gray beard since she'd last seen him. "Some say lucky shot by the Imps. Some say it was treason. Some say it was a Mando named Hondo Karr that shot him."

"Where is this Hondo Karr now?" asked Draco.

"Missing since Botajef."

"Killed in action?"

Jind shrugged. "Others say he deserted. Nobody knows anything for sure."

"What kind of background did Karr have?" asked Niin.

Jind shrugged again. "He was young, but experienced. Brave, loyal, all that. Protégé to one of Auchs' lieutenants. They say Karr killed Vevec too."

Marin remembered that one from her meeting with Ordo last year. "Could he have been hired to do those things?"

"Of course he *could* have. Mandos *are* mercenaries," Jind's father told them. Age hadn't done any favors to Mekr Skirata's scarred face, but his dark eyes showed the same cunning as always.

"I understand your people have a sense of honor," said Niin. There was just a hint of condescension in the Imperial's voice but the Skiratas latched onto it.

"Some barves, do, some don't," said Mekr. "This Hondo, maybe he never did. Maybe he's being slandered. Plenty folk think Auchs himself did something shifty at Botajef, though they mostly keep that to themselves."

"Was Auchs ambitious?" asked Niin.

"Before Botajef, I only heard he was loyal to Ordo," said Jind. "They didn't always agree, but Ordo reached out to Auchs and made him a partner when he didn't need to. People say Auchs was grateful for it. Auchs *still* stays he'd grateful to Ordo."

"Even as he reverses all his policies," Marin put in.

"Maybe, but by and large, people here don't mind being out of that war."

"You're *mercenaries*," Draco said, incredulous. "You don't want to fight?"

"We're happy to fight some *aruetiise*'s battles for 'em," Mekr grunted, "But this thing between the Empire and Alliance is something else. When wars get this big, this fierce, our kind gets smashed between sides." He glanced at Marin, slightly accusing. "This war was never popular here."

"Auchs did more than bow to popular will. He pulled you out in the middle of a crucial battle," said Niin. "I need to know more about the man. I know his uncle Gevern was the Mandalore. And I read his father was killed when he was young. What can you tell me about that?"

There was more than just curiosity in his tone and it put the chamber into tense silence. Marin was uncomfortably uncertain of how much Niin actually knew. Tamar, who'd been mute until now, looked hard at Niin. "The Skiratas and Auchs have history. Nobody's denying that. It's why we're here now. Auchs' father, Kaynar, killed two of us because he thought that *I* killed Gevern." She looked hard at Niin. "I did *not* kill Gevern, but I wanted to. Kaynar was full of *osik* and he deserved what he got. You can tell I'm being honest, can't you?"

The Iktotchi's horned head bobbed. "I can. And frankly, I don't care about your personal problems with the Auchs family unless it explains what happened at Botajef."

"It doesn't, so there's nothing to care about," Jind said.

Draco sighed with a young man's impatience. "If that's the case, then why are we *here*?"

"That's what I've been *shabla* wondering," grunted Mekr. "You Imps are the ones who bought out Auchs. Why're you sneaking around, trying to get info on him now?"

"What happened at Botajef isn't that simple," said Niin.

"Meaning your high and mighty emperor doesn't know what his left and right hands are doing." Mekr's grin was white and fierce. "How interesting."

Tamar sighed. "If you want connections with Auchs' enemies... we can give you those."

"I'm not looking to come at him through his enemies," said Niin. "He'll be expecting that. We need to come at him through his *allies*."

"We're not exactly close with Auchs' friends," said Mekr.

"I didn't say friends, I said *allies*. I'm hoping you can provide us with two contacts." Niin held up twinned fingers. "First, a lieutenant who's thrown himself in with Auchs but has ambitions of his own. Preferably a new ally, one Auchs wouldn't fully trust. Second, I want to talk to *another* new ally, but not one you think would ever try and unseat Auchs. Perhaps someone who hasn't built a sufficient network of his *own* allies yet."

Marin watched Tamar, Jind, and Mekr go thoughtful. "So you want a weak link, and a strong link," said Jind. "And you'll go at him through the weak one."

"No. We'll go at him through the strong one." Niin's smile was tight and confident. Marin got the impression he enjoyed plot-spinning and didn't get to do it often. "We'll approach the weak one first, then sell them to the strong one, and *they'll* get us to Auchs. I'd also like to make use of you, personally. Given the Skiratas' bad history with Auchs, I think you'd make a convincing bait for the weak link."

"You want to use us as a stalking strill," Mekr scowled. "Send us into the field, flush out Auchs' people. That would put us in danger."

"I was assured you people are good at hiding. You seem to have done well so far."

"This would mean we'd have to pick up our ships and leave Mandalore, maybe for a long time."

"It is a big galaxy."

Mekr stared at Niin, who stared back and didn't flinch. The Mando said, "That kind of service doesn't come cheap."

"We've brought payment."

"Imp credits?"

"Aurodium ingots."

Mekr raised a white brow. "Let's see some."

Draco growled deep in his throat, but Niin raised a hand. With the other, he reached into his jacket and took out a handful of silvery metal strips. He placed them on the low

table in front of Mekk and Jind. The younger man picked up one piece and held it up to the light.

"It's legitimate," Draco insisted.

"I believe it is," said Jind as he slipped the aurodium into his own pocket.

"You'll have that amount again, on completion of work," Niin said.

Mekk nodded. "Give us until noon tomorrow. We should have contacts for you. Then you can let us in on the rest of your plan."

"They're not to know who we are," Niin said. "Nor who we work for."

"I won't tell 'em, but frankly, you barves smell like Imps from a parsec away."

Draco glared but nothing more. Niin asked, "Can you procure us some spare *beskar*?"

"Mando drag might be tricky for you," Jind pointed out.

Niin bobbed his horned head. "I know. But if you can spare suits for my companions, it would help immensely."

"I think that can be arranged," said Tamar. "Anything else?"

"Not tonight." Niin rose, and Draco rose with him. "Thank you for your assistance."

The two Imperial Knights left the *Bottom Line* and retreated through the night-black woods toward *Runaround*, where they'd spend the night. Being rid of them was a relief, but Marin didn't feel wholly comfortable with her family either. They'd welcomed her as one of their own even though she'd been a Jedi; then she'd walked out on them and barely seen any of them since.

"You keep weird company nowadays, *Mar'ika*," Jind told her.

"I told you, this wasn't my choice. Fel was holding my family hostage."

"A man threatens my wife or boys like that, I'd shoot him."

"Well, it's a good thing the emperor didn't know where to find you."

"You've got to be careful about this, girl," Mekk growled. "Very careful. Mando succession fights can get messy."

"This one sounds *less* messy than I expected," Marin said. "Yaga Auchs seems like he's bent his rivals into submission fast."

"Yeah, almost too fast," Mekr agreed. "I thought, if he had Imps backing him up, that might explain it. But now those *di'kute* show up, straight from His Stripe-Haired Imp Majesty, and if *they* don't know what's going... That's all the more reason to be careful."

"I will. Believe me, I've had more than enough trouble with the Auchs family already."

Mekr and Jind nodded like they understood, but they didn't. They couldn't. Only Tamar did, and she avoided Marin's eyes until the two men pushed off from their bench and left the *karyai*. Only mother and daughter remained.

"Are you sure Benet and Ania are safe?" asked Tamar.

"They're free. I can't be positive the Imps didn't put a tracker on *Fast Start*... But I don't *think* they did."

A short pause. Then her mother asked, "Is it really like Mekr said? Imps scheming against Imps?"

"I don't know. Roan seems to think so. What did you get from them, in the Force?"

Tamar's look asked whether Marin was still refusing to use the Force. Marin stared back in reply. The older woman said, "The younger one was mostly just impatient. The Iktotchi... He's a smart one. Patient. Deliberate."

"Does he know who I am?"

"I think he suspects. But I don't think he'd told the younger one." Another pause. "I don't think they mean you harm. They'll probably let you go once this is over."

The idea hadn't even occurred to Marin. Roan Fel was a long way from the teenager she'd once known, but she'd never thought he might order his own cousin's execution just to ensure silence.

Her mother, though, thought on those lines. She always had. Tamar was Mandalorian, born and bred. Marin had just done a little play-acting, a long time ago.

"I'm relieved," Marin muttered, but she was more unsettled now than ever.

Yet another pause, more awkward than the others. Eventually Tamar said, "None of this is your fault. You know that, don't you?"

Marin exhaled. "If I hadn't let Yaga Auchs live... If I'd killed him with his father..."

"Then the Imps- or whoever- would have found a different *shabuir* to buy out." The old woman's voice was soft but firm.

It was possible, maybe even true. Marin had been telling herself that ever since Botajef and still wasn't sure if she believed it.

"You and I, we've had to deal with more than enough *osik* from the Auchs family," Tamar pressed. "There's been give and take from both sides but they're the ones who started by crawling in bed with the Sith all those years ago. Right now it's best to stay as far away from them as possible."

"That was my plan," Marin said dryly, "Until Fel showed up."

"Fels are always trouble," Tamar agreed, with a slight melancholy smile. "But at the end of the day we take care of our own. Your Benet, and Ania most of all. Nothing's more important than them."

Marin already knew that too. Mandos said family was more than bloodline, but sometimes it was smaller too. Sometimes it was just a handful of people to love and protect. For Marin, a handful was enough.

It was apparently Mandalorian tradition to talk even the most dangerous kind of shop in seedy smoke-filled tapcafes. For their meeting with Govum Haugh, one of Yaga Auchs' newest and least loyal lieutenants, the Skiratas had wisely chosen a different locale. Haugh's landspeeder rendezvoused with Mekr Skirata's a hundred-twenty kilometers southwest of Keldabe, on an empty plain where wind swept ripples through tall grass.

Plotting against the reigning Mandalore was not something even brazen Mandos did in public. More importantly, the lack of a boisterous crowd made it easier for the audio receptors on Antares Draco's borrowed T-visor helmet to

pick up the conversation and transmit it back to the *Bottom Line*, parked twenty kilos away and hidden by a camo net.

Eshkar Niin hunched over the freighter's comm console, watching the audio and visual stream. Draco had gone along with Marin and Mekk Skirata in a borrowed *beskar* suit. Govum Haugh showed up in his landspeeder with two faceless armored guards, though they remained by the speeder when Haugh got out to parlay. He took off his helmet to do so. Mekk, tucked his own- black but stamped with a white Mythosaur icon across the face- beneath his arm.

Wind broke across the field, playing with Mekk's white hair and sometimes fuzzing Draco's audio feed, forcing Niin to hunch close in attention. Govum Haugh was a squat, swarthy, homely human of middling age. He began the conversation with a front of undisguised skepticism, which waned gradually as the talk wore on.

"Heard you guys scuttled your old base, where was it at? Kyrimorut?" Haugh fished. "You didn't used to be so cautious, old man."

"I'm just protecting my clan against Auch's. That's why I'm here, talking to you. If you hear Auch's is going to move against us, for any reason, you let us know. We'll owe you a favor. And we're good people to get favors from."

"I'm amenable. I got nothing against you or your clan. But I've thrown in with Auch's now."

"So I heard. You used to be more ambitious."

Haugh grunted again. "I'm not dumb either. No smart man makes an enemy of Auch's."

"Meaning what?"

"The way I hear it, guys who think they can stand against him, they get whisked away. Then they come back, all nice and compliant. Some, anyway. Others stay disappeared."

"What, like somebody's messed with their brains?" Mekk sounded incredulous, but Niin wondered. Powerful enough Force suggestion could work, even on strong-minded mercenaries. Such tactics were often considered dark side tools, but they were undeniably useful.

"Maybe, I don't know. Which is why I have to keep this meeting quiet. And keep in Auch's' good graces."

"Doesn't sound like the kinda boss I'd like to work under."

"Yeah, well, he's *Mand'alor*. He's boss whether we like it or not."

"Unless somebody changes that."

"Didn't you hear what I just told you, *di'kut*? You don't get to cross Auchs. Nobody does."

"Not if you go at him the obvious way. But if he's got some help... we might have some too."

Haugh's eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

Mekr let him guess. Niin glanced at the old woman seated beside him. "What's he implying?"

"Rumor has it some Skiratas have Jedi powers," Tamar said. "Mandos aren't big fans of Jedi, but it can be useful now and then."

"Is there truth to it?"

"My great-grandmother was an Old Republic Jedi. Broke her vows, married a clone. Maybe she passed some of those midi-chlorians on." Tamar tilted her head. "Your emperor let *your* kind marry? I can't remember."

"We have no vow of celibacy," Niin muttered. She was trying to distract him but he reached lightly with the Force to get a read on her. She wasn't lying, but she was guarding something. She was doing it intentionally; most likely she had Force skills and some training too.

More curious things. He hadn't sensed anything unusual about Tamar's daughter in the Force, but there was clearly something about her if the emperor had gone halfway across the galaxy to enlist her aid. He knew that the previous emperor, Davek Fel, had had a Jedi brother named Arlen. He knew that Arlen had a daughter, and apparently the daughter had left the Jedi Order.

And this woman, who was born from a Mandalorian Force-user mother and currently captained an unremarkable freighter, used the last name *Solo*. The same surname, Niin knew, as the emperor's grandmother Jaina. He knew Roan Fel wanted this kept quiet, so Niin hadn't told Draco, but the conclusion drew itself.

"What if I want to call a favor in early?" Haugh's words jarred him from his reverie.

"What kind of favor?"

"If you can figure out who or what Auchs has in his pocket, I'll be the one owing *you*. And if your help's good enough, I'll be in position to do your powerful favors. You understand what I'm saying?"

"I think I do." Mekr put his hands on his hips. "I can't just send my people poking around with no clue what's going on."

"Look into Bovar Shal and Vosh Woxu. They're both, let's say, recent converts to Yaga Auchs' cause. Won't say how or why, only that they've seen the light. Check on them, but be careful. They're probably being watched."

"Nice score," Tamar muttered. Niin nodded; he hadn't expected this, but it could be useful.

"It's a good place to start. Thanks for that, Haugh."

"Keep me informed. Any information is good information. And I'm not the only one who wants it."

"We'll keep that in mind. Anything else?"

"Was about to ask you that." Haugh shook his head. "You know how to contact me when you find something."

"Will do. Until then, *vod*."

The two men shook, stuck their helmets back on, and started walking to their respective speeders. The view feed from Draco's helmet panned away, and once their speeder was on its way back to the *Bottom Line*, Mekr's voice grated over the cockpit speakers.

"You got all that?"

"Came in clear," Tamar confirmed.

"What do we do now?" asked Draco. "Take the recording straight to, ah—"

"Zerimar," Mekr supplied, naming the *other* new lieutenant who was supposed to be more loyal to Auchs than Haugh.

"That was the plan," said Niin. "However, it might be wise to check out the two men he named first."

"He's right about them being watched," Mekr warned.

"Draco and I have means of eluding watchers. This is something I think I can handle personally." If some Force powers had affected Shal or Woxu's minds, he should be able to detect it. Niin looked forward to getting involved

directly. He felt they were on to something, closer to their quarry than they had ever been, and it gave him an adrenaline-thrill. Whoever was behind Auchs was behind this whole sham war, he could feel it. They were master manipulators to have gone undetected thus far, and it gave him no small pride to be the one to catch them.

But not yet, he reminded himself. He hadn't won yet.

"We're still giving the recording of this meeting to Zerimar, aren't we?" asked Marin.

"Unless we can get anything greatly revelatory from Shal or Woxu, yes," Niin said. "And we give them the audio only. That way we can say one of Haugh's guards took it."

"And by selling out Haugh, we get close to Zerimar, and *she* gets us close to Auchs," Mekr said.

"He gets *me* close to Auchs," Niin clarified. "*You* should take your ship and get off-planet before I hand the recording to Zerimar."

"Fine by me, so long as I get the rest of my payment first."

"You will."

"Good to know. Guess Imp service isn't so bad after all."

After that Mekr killed the connection and concentrated on his driving. Niin sat back, contented for the moment, but caught Tamar giving him a sidelong glare.

"I'll be heading out with Mekr," she said. "But if anything happens to my daughter on account of this *osik* you've dragged her into, I'll hold you *and* your emperor accountable. Understand?"

Niin's almost laughed at the old woman's presumption, but he caught the hard threat in her eyes. "I understand completely," he said. Her glare lingered on him for a moment more before she got out of her chair and lurched out of the cabin.

He wouldn't grudge the woman her threat. The success of the mission so far threatened to carry Eshkar Niin to distraction. He would celebrate victory once it was accomplished, and only then.

Kol Skywalker had become more accustomed to the bowels of the Alliance military headquarters than he'd ever wished

to be. The briefing room was a black windowless chamber submerged inside the Coruscant complex, itself the size of a small city. When he'd first started spending time here it had felt suffocating; now he was getting used to it, which was in some ways worse.

Arlen Fel had joined Kol today, which was some balm. Arlen had, by all accounts, been something of a wayward knight when he was younger, or at least a very adventurous one. Age had settled him; at nearly eighty, his beard and hair had gone white, and his movements were always deliberate and careful. He'd been in charge of the Jedi consulate on Coruscant since before the war and had done his best to prepare Kol for the tedium and frustration of working with the Alliance leaders, which sometimes pushed him toward un-Jedi-like behavior.

The beings he'd gathered with today were, for the most part, easy to work with; certainly moreso than the triumvirs and senate committees with whom Kol often argued. Admiral Lekhwash was chairing the meeting. To his right sat Admiral Stazi, who'd recently returned with the Quarren from the repair yards Rendili. Joining them via ultra-secure holo-transmission was the Second Fleet's Rear Admiral Petan, currently stationed at Palanhi, and the Fourth's Admiral Slossar, transmitting from Contruum. The Jedi and top admirals had been joined by the Alliance's intelligence director, a deceptively harmless-looking Drall named Ekorian. All of this underscored that something major was in the offing.

"Yesterday evening, Director Ekorian and I presented our new strategy to the triumvirs," Lekhwash said. "It took some arguing, but I'm pleased to announce we're ready to move ahead with our offensive into Imperial space."

Through the Force, Kol could feel those present in the room. Relief mixed with anticipation and cold resolve. Rear Admiral Petan, whose forces sat a mere half-day away from the Imperial fortress world of Bilbringi, asked, "Have we selected a target?"

"We have devised a plan," the Quarren nodded. "However, we will let the Imperials chose our battle location for us."

A wave of confusion spread through the room. "How can we shore up our supply lines if we don't know where the battle will be?" asked Petan.

"The next stage can begin one of two ways." Lekhwash held up a long finger. "We can press into Imperial space, or they can attempt to press again into ours. We hope to begin with the second option, then progress into the first."

"You mean you're leading them into a trap." Stazi's voice had an eager edge.

Lekhwash tapped a button on the table, bringing up a holomap that displayed the slice of the Inner Rim and Colonies where most of the fighting had been taking place. Kol noted highlights at Palanhi and Contruum, as well as the Empire's main staging areas at Bilbringi, Ord Lithone, and Corsin.

"The Imperials know that if we begin a push into their space, it will be difficult for them to repulse. Even without the Mandalorians, we have the advantage in manpower and resources. The Imperials know this too, which is why they began this war with such a fierce offensive. They hoped to catch us unprepared and force their way into the Core, where they could claim major systems."

Lekhwash jabbed a finger at the light-point marking Bilbringi. "Our intel has confirmed that the Imperials have moved their flagship *Invincible* to their foremost base. It's an old ship, but mighty, and in moving it I'm sure they were trying to forestall a push on our part. We will, therefore, not attack Bilbringi." The Quarren looked at Petan. "In fact, after this meeting, you will begin clustering your ships at Palanhi."

The human frowned. "For defensive purposes?"

"Ostensibly, yes. However, you will also draw Second Fleet ships away from several key systems, namely Paqualis and Champala."

"We'd risk control of the Hydian?" hissed Admiral Slossar.

Lekhwash nodded at the serpentine Sluissi. "Baiting a trap requires some level of risk."

"What, specifically, are we baiting for?" Arlen asked. "*Invincible*?"

"Indeed." Lekhwash's mouth-tentacles twitched eagerly. "If we can destroy the Empire's finest ship, it's all the more likely we can force them to negotiate an end to this war."

"If," repeated Slossar. "What would you have the Third Fleet do?"

"You will also help bait the trap. Reinforce Bandomeer and Celanon. From there you might threaten their position at Corsin. Instead, you will launch a limited offensive against Botajef. We must make it look like we intend to retake the world." Lekhwash pointed out the markers along the Hydian Way. As the galaxy's longest and most important hyperspace route, it had been a site of contention for the past year. "The Imperials will see that Paqualis and Champala are under-defended. They are within easy striking distance from both Ord Lithone and Corsin. With *Invincible* they could assemble a mighty offensive and still leave all three of their fortress worlds well-protected."

"And if they strike, the First and Fifth fleets will be ready for them," Stazi surmised.

Lekhwash nodded. "They'll be staged at points near both systems. We'll also have interdictors standing by to hold the Imperials."

"They may suspect a trap," Kol said evenly.

"My agents are already at work," Ekorian said. The Drallish intelligence director had a soft, high-pitched voice, almost like a human child's. "We've pinpointed their spies at the Rendili shipyards and will feed them false intel suggesting the repairs are taking overlong. We've also arranged for the local governments at Champala and Paqualis to file complaints that their systems are under-defended."

Kol shook his head. "It sounds like a well-baited trap, but how can we be sure *Invincible* will jump in?"

"The Imperials have no choice but to be bold. Our spies on Bastion report that Roan Fel is being pressured to bring *Invincible* on the offensive. So long as Bilbringi is properly reinforced, he'll be able to do so."

"And how do we know *our* spies aren't getting bad intel?" Arlen drawled.

"That is always a risk," the Drall said, "But the intelligence only backs up the logical assumption. The Empire must fight hard, or die."

"They may take our marshalling at Paqualis as a threat and hold back *Invincible*," Petan put in.

"Then I suggest you run fleet-wide drills for system defense," Ekorian said. "Their watchers will see it and draw the natural conclusion."

Stazi said, "The hardest part will be moving our ships out of Rendili without their spies sending word."

"For that, we may require Jedi help." Ekorian eyes Kol and Arlen. "We can interdict and hold their spies for short-term without Bastion knowing, but we cannot write their false reports for them. They must be *convinced* to send Bastion their lies."

Kol knew where this was going; he equivocated. "It's not unheard of to turn spies. Many are more loyal to credits than any government."

"Indeed. And others are fanatic in their allegiance." The diminutive Drall no longer looked like a child's toy; her green eyes pierced Kol with grim intent. "I'd need no more than a dozen Jedi, and only in the days immediately leading up to the withdrawal. We'd need those particularly experienced with persuasive abilities."

"Force suggestion is... difficult," Arlen said. "It works best on the weak-minded, and I'm sure the Emperor's agents are taught to resist persuasion."

"But not *Jedi* persuasion."

"We don't know that. The Imperial Knights could have trained them," Kol said. It was a stall; he didn't think it was true; from what his brother had told him, the Imperial Knights and Intelligence were operating awkwardly apart.

Stazi cleared his throat. "Master Skywalker, I understand that, as a Jedi, you may have... ethical reservations. However, you've pledged to serve the Alliance. The success of this critical battle may depend on Jedi help. Are you really going to abandon us now?"

Kol almost winced at his blunt words. Lekhwash sat beside Stazi, face still, but he could sense concord coming from him

in the Force. The Quarren had a less confrontational persona than the Duros, but as strategists they were like minds.

It was the kind of situation Kol had expected when the war began. So far the Jedi had served as front-line troops, healers, advisors, and sometimes spies. None of his knights or masters had strayed to the dark side yet, but he'd heard of many who'd been traumatized in ways small and large by what they'd had to do.

He looked silently at Arlen, imploring the older man for help. Arlen's face was stoic, but in the Force he conveyed regret and resolve. Stazi was correct; the Jedi had committed themselves and could not abandon the Alliance in its hour need.

Looking at the admirals, at the hard-eyed little intel chief, Kol said, "I'll need time to select Jedi most suitable for this mission. Once I have... they will help you."

Ekorian nodded once, satisfied. Lekhwash said, "I trust the Jedi will also be ready to fight at Champala and Paqualis?"

"Of course," Kol said. "We are committed."

Chapter Fifteen

Six days into her return to Mandalore, the mission seemed to be going much better than Marin had anticipated. That didn't cause her to get confident or even optimistic. Her mother and relatives had shipped offworld now, leaving her alone with two Imperial Knights and a planetful of potential enemies, including a powerful man whose father and uncle she'd killed and who wouldn't hesitate to kill her if he learned the truth.

But so far, things were going alright. Niin and Draco had secreted themselves into Keldabe and gone to visit the two people named by Govum Haugh: Bovar Shal and Vosh Woxu. Using the Force to distract watchers and jam security devices, the Imperial Knights had infiltrated both men's private homes, interrogated them, then wiped their memories. Back in Jedi school, Marin had been taught that the activity tread perilously close to the dark side, but neither Draco nor Niin seemed concerned.

The results, Niin said, were inconclusive. Even under interrogation and threat of violence, the men had insisted their newfound loyalty to Yaga Auch's was driven solely by love of their *Mand'alor*. Niin reported that they'd been, if anything, too calm and certain under pressure. Marin had asked whether there was any sign their minds had been tampered with in the Force. Niin, with uncharacteristic hesitation, admitted that he was not sure. Marin knew those kinds of memory wipes usually left marks that other Force-users could notice, but didn't press the point. In case Niin

hadn't figured out who she was already, she wasn't giving any hints.

Since Shal and Woxu were dead ends, that meant they were back to the original plan. Before climbing into the *Bottom Line* and hauling offworld, Mekk had put Marin on contact with someone who, in turn, would introduce them to Vaun Zerimar, another new lieutenant under Yaga Auchs and a rival of Govum Haugh.

Zerimar surprised Marin by being a young woman, barely past thirty but clearly ambitious, probably too much for her own good. When Marin and Antares Draco came to her offering incriminating information on her rival she jumped at it, and remembered to question their motives only after they'd played her the audio recording of Haugh conspiring with the Skiratas.

Draco ended up being a better actor than Marin expected. Like Marin, he'd come in a suit of borrowed *beskar* and was play-acting as a Mando from an obscure clan. He shifted his crisp Imperial accent into something lower-class and adopted an upstart's swagger as he explained, "I've been under Haugh's heel for years and it's getting me nowhere. I've had enough of that and enough of him."

"You want to work for my crew now?" asked Zerimar.

"All I want is a payout," Draco snarled. "And I want to see that *chakaar* get what he deserves."

That lead to haggling over prices, and again Draco impressed her. He held out for just the right amount, making his greed seem real without exasperating Zerimar. Once that was finally accomplished he added, "I want to be there when you nab him, too."

That raised Zerimar's brows. "What exactly do you think's going to happen to Haugh?"

"Same thing that'll happen to the Skiratas too. They're in it together."

"Indeed." Now, finally, she was getting keen. "But what, specifically?"

Draco hesitated. Marin, who'd hovered behind him as his ostensible bodyguard, said, "We've heard the *Mand'alor* has ways of making people change their minds."

“What ways?”

“Don’t know. I wish we did. Just that he’s got ways.”

“Indeed he does,” Zerimar said in a low voice. Her eyes narrowed; she started calculating factors besides the two armored beings in front of her. How much *she* knew about Auch’s secret helpers was an unknown factor.

“Stay here,” Zerimar said at last. “I’ll give this news to the *Mand’alor* directly.”

“I want to be there when Haugh goes down,” Draco insisted.

“I’ll make sure that’s clear,” Zerimar said, then slipped into a back room, leaving Marin and Draco alone.

There was no telling if Zerimar bugged her own place, so Draco and Marin slid their helmets back on. It had been a long, long time since Marin had felt tight metal pressing her head on all sides and she didn’t like it. She’d borrowed her mother’s battered old equipment for this job: black *beskar* plates with blue highlights, a *kama* that wrapped two-thirds of the way around her waist like a skirt. It was tight in a few places but fit remarkably well overall. And, like Draco’s, it contained a private, encrypted comlink built into the helmet.

“She says she’d sending out a call now.” The Imperial kept his voice low. “Are you catching it, Master?”

“I see it,” Eshkar Niin confirmed. With his curved Iktotchi horns, the mastermind of this scheme couldn’t waltz around with a bucket-helmet and pretend to be a Mando. That was fine; instead he’d secreted himself at a power junction beneath Zerimar’s building and was tapping into her comm system.

Marin and Draco waited in silence until Niin reported, “She’d made a connection. It’s encrypted, which is no surprise.”

“Can you break it?” asked Marin.

“Not yet. I’m recording a copy we can analyze later. And tracking the data stream.”

It was something. Marin tensed as they waited. Minutes dragged on, with Niin occasionally commenting that the call was ongoing. Finally, after an interminable ten minutes, he announced that Zerimar had ended it.

Draco and Marin removed their helmets just in time for Zerimar to walk back into the room and find them as she'd left them. "The *Mand'ador* had reviewed your recording," she said, "And will act on it. You'll receive the requested payment, naturally."

"Good," said Draco. "When can I pay Haugh my respects?"

"The *Mand'ador* prefers to take care of this with his own people."

"We had a deal," Draco snarled. His acting was, if anything, a little overdone.

"Yes," said Zerimar. "Our deal was that you were paid in exchange for passing this vital information to the *Mand'ador*. You'll get your money. Believe me, whatever grudge you have against Haugh will be satisfied."

"I wanted to make sure. In person."

Zerimar gave a little sigh. "The *Mand'ador* has authorized to give you ten percent extra payment if you'll let it go."

"He's worth a lot more to me than ten percent—"

Marin put a hand on his wrist. "*Udesii, ner vod*. Ten percent's good enough." She gave it a little squeeze to show she meant it.

With a very reluctant scowl, Draco said, "Okay. Agreed. But I want payment before I leave."

"Naturally," said Zerimar.

She removed a metal case the size of her hand and held it out. Draco took it, opened it, and counted the slips of aurodium. By Marin's count it was half of what Draco and Niin had paid the Skiratas. The emperor would just have to eat his losses.

"Looks good," Marin said, and gave Zerimar a nod. "Pleasure doing business with you."

"The pleasure," said the other woman, "is all mine."

Draco and Marin put on their helmets and retreated into the shadow-cloaked afternoon streets of Keldabe, leaving Vaun Zerimar to privately bask in her small victory.

As they hurried toward the place where they'd parked their rented speeder bikes Draco asked, "Did you get all that, Master?"

“Yes,” Niin replied. “You were smart to retreat when you did.”

“I’d have preferred to be there myself when they took him.”

“I know, Antares. But we’ll fall back on Plan B. Best move fast- there’s no telling when Auchs will move on Haugh.”

“Understood,” Marin said. “Do you think you have Auchs’ location?”

“I got a trace on the comm. Unless he was using a relay, which is possible, he’s inside Keldabe. I’ll go there now. Both of you, take positions near Haugh’s place.”

Niin killed the connection. Without another shared word, Draco and Marin mounted their speeder bikes and took off. Night was falling over Keldabe and it looked to be a long one.

After returning to the speeder bike he’d left hidden in one of Keldabe’s narrow alleys, it took Eshkar Niin less than fifteen minutes to reach the recipient location of Vaun Zerimar’s comm message. Rather than some relay station like he’d feared, it was inside an industrial district that had attached itself to the old walled city. Amidst its rows of angular durasteel and ferrocrete buildings he located what looked like a warehouse or hangar; hardly the expected nesting place for an enthroned Mandalore.

From there Niin he placed himself flat on the roof of a building two rows away and set to watching. Adrenaline and anticipation waned after the first hour of sitting and watching, checking in with Draco and Marin ever twenty minutes to make sure they were watching the landing fields where Govum Haugh’s docked ship doubled as his domicile.

Finally, once night had fully fallen, something happened. The door to the warehouse opened; a foursome of swoop bikes shot out and raced away. Niin tracked them as long as he could with macrobinoculars, then commed a warning to Draco and Marin. Fourteen long minutes later they commed back, saying that four swoops had just circled Haugh’s ship and set down. Haugh had his landing ramp up and security system activated, but the four intruders- Draco reported they

all wore black suits and helmets, but not standard Mandalorian T-visors- had no problem storming inside. Two minutes after entering, they came out with a limp and wrapped-up body, dropped it onto the back of one swoop, and went speeding into the night again.

“Start heading to my location, but come *slowly*,” Niin told them. “We don’t want them to think they’re being followed.”

“What if they don’t come back to the warehouse?” asked Draco.

“They will,” Niin said. “Whatever they’re doing they’re keeping it quiet. They’d never spread secret operations over more locations than necessary.”

More, he could *feel* it. He was so close to finding his quarry. Finally the ones who’d schemed to trap the Empire would be trapped themselves.

It would take another fourteen minutes for the speeder bikes to return to the warehouse. Niin acted quickly, calling on the Force to extend his leaps and bound from rooftop to rooftop to rooftop. Once he was atop his enemy’s building he reached out with the Force and felt sentient beings inside. He couldn’t tell how many; five or six, perhaps. They emanated anticipation, but it was nothing compared to Niin’s.

When the four swoop bikes spiraled out of the night sky, Niin dropped himself off the roof’s edge with a strand of fiberchord, shielding himself from view. Once they were inside he pulled himself back onto the roof. It took him another minute to find the access hatch. His white lightsaber flashed for just a second as it cut its security latch. He pocketed his saber, opened the hatch with a touch of the Force, and dropped inside the warehouse.

He lowered soundlessly to a catwalk. From there he could look down, nearly ten meters, to the cold duracrete floor. Amidst shelves of weapons and equipment, at the center of a pool of light, Govum Haugh’s stout body had been strapped to a chair. The four black-garbed kidnappers were standing around him, helmets removed. Seen from above it was hard to spot their faces, but their fine green scales and long black locks, mostly gathered into balls at the top of otherwise-hairless scalps, marked them as Falleen.

The five of them weren't alone. Into the pool of light stepped three more beings, all in Mandalorian *beskar*. Two soldiers, both in black, had their faces obscured by T-visor helmets, but the third had his face bare. Yaga Auchs scowled as he looked down at the captive. From the bruises on his face, Haugh had already taken a beating.

Auchs' right leg lashed out, kicked Haugh's. "It's true, isn't it?" Auchs barked. "I was prepared to *trust* you, Govum. And how do you repay me? You sneak around my back. You make deals with the karking Skiratas!"

He kicked Haugh again. The captive jerked in his binds. "I wasn't trying anything on you, Mandalore! I swear! I don't know who told you what—"

Auchs took out a small audio disk, tapped it on. Up on the catwalk, Niin caught only tinny echoes of the conversation between Haugh and Mekk Skirata.

"That was a ploy, damn it!" Haugh spat. Niin could see spots of blood arc from his mouth. "I swear to every god, Mandalore, that was just a trap. I was gonna draw them out, given 'em to *you*."

"They talked to you a *week* ago. And you didn't tell me?" Auchs lunged close, but the Falleen and his bodyguards stayed planted. The Mandalore growled in Haugh's face; he radiated genuine anger through the Force. "I'm trying to build a coalition, Govum. Just like Chernan Ordo did. I'm trying to gather people I could trust. You could have been one of them, but you threw your chance away. You have nobody to blame but yourself for what happens next."

Haugh looked anxiously at the Falleen. "What's next? What are they going to *do* to me? You're not going to kill me, are you?"

"Some Mandalorian you are, afraid of death," Auchs hissed, then pulled away. "But no. I'm not."

He snapped his fingers, and the Falleen moved in. Niin watched in fascination as they surrounded Haugh. Two touched his scalp; the green of their scales shifted color, becoming tinted with warmer shades. He knew that Falleen could emanate powerful pheromones to sway people to do their bidding. Normally it was a temporary thing, but he'd

heard that the most skilled of them could mold sentient minds in the longer term.

He also knew that the Falleen homeworld had been ravaged by the Vong twice over, and they were critical members of Admiral Keelu's anti-Jedi forces.

Things fell into place. Keelu and her allies saw the Empire on the verge of losing the war. They pooled money, possibly from criminal elements, to convince the Mandalorians to withdraw. They shored up Auch's supremacy to keep it that way while the war dragged on. He wasn't sure what Nyna Calixte's role in this was. Perhaps she was working with Keelu to keep this war going; perhaps she really had done as she'd said and paid Auch off, while Keelu sweetened the deal on her own.

Some things were uncertain, but the most important things were clear. He'd reached the end of his search, accomplished his mission, but Eshkar Niin felt a wash of disappointment unlike anything he'd ever known. He'd entertained the hope, the fantasy, that this hunt on Mandalore would reveal the schemers who'd pushed the Empire to war, perhaps poisoned the Ossus Project itself. Over the past year he'd come to admire his unseen enemies as masters of strategy and misdirection. Perhaps they were still out there; perhaps he'd been chasing a phantom enemy, conjured up by his own ambitious longing for a worthy foe.

All he knew was that Yaga Auch's mysterious benefactors had turned out to be disappointingly mundane.

He would report all of this to the emperor, of course. He and Draco would probably be rewarded, and Keelu taken to task, but nothing major would change. Revelation eluded him still.

Niin felt Draco touch him in the Force, questioning. He'd turned off his comlink before going into the hangar and he mentally pushed back on his apprentice, telling him to hold position. Draco did as he was told. Niin turned his attention back to the floor, where the Falleen were still working Haugh over. There seemed little more to see.

Paranoia shot through him and was gone just as fast. For a moment he'd been sure that someone was watching him.

Auchs and his faceless bodyguards were watching the Falleen work; no one had glanced up at the shadowed catwalk the entire time. Paranoia, that was all. Still, Niin stretched out with the Force to sense anyone else in the building. He felt nothing.

Accomplished but unsatisfied, Niin rose out of his crouch, stepped silently across the catwalk to the hatch, and propelled himself into the night.

Nat Skywalker was surprised and, truth be told, less than comfortable to learn that his mother had brought along three hulking Yuuzhan Vong warriors as bodyguards. He reminded himself that the Temple was short-staffed and that it was good his mother had brought *someone*, because whoever had laid waste to the Jensaarai center on Soulex had done so viciously.

Midday sun turned the scorched-black earth bright and warm. Nat squinted as he scanned the crater that spread far in all directions around them. He'd never seen the results of a heavy orbital bombardment up close. What stunned him was how *empty* the crater was. There was no gnarled mechanical wreckage, no husks from charred buildings. There were no bodies and no bones. A rain of turbolaser fire from orbit had superheated the planet's surface, rending all signs of life on a molecular level, leaving only a black expanse behind.

This was Nat's second time seeing it up close, and it still stunned him. On discovering what had happened at Soulex he'd called for aid and waited a day for his mother and her unlikely bodyguards to arrive. In that time he'd done a preliminary investigation into what had happened, but it still left too many questions.

"There was one ship," he told her. "An inbound cargo ship on the edge of the system caught it. They identified it as an old Imperial frigate, *Velox*-class."

"Do you have proof of that?"

"I have a copy of their sensor data." After he'd tracked down the ship's captain, all it had taken was buying him two rounds on Soulex's least expensive cantina. The planet's locals were more confused by the attack than anything. Many

hadn't even known there was a Jensaarai enclave on their northern continent, and none had expected the war between the Empire and Alliance to make its way to their irrelevant little world. Nat still wasn't sure it had.

He watched as Jade dropped down on one knee to run fingers through the ash. She closed her eyes and Nat could feel her reach into the Force. He'd felt this before; it sent a tingle down his spine, just feeling it second-hand. His mother was able to shut down outside influences and reach a greater power than Nat himself ever had. Maybe it was because her Skywalker blood was a little more pure. Maybe it was because she'd achieved a comfort with that power than Nat never had. He knew it hadn't come easy for her; she'd lost her own mother as a child, her father as a teenager, her husband when Nat and Kol were small. Despite those trials, or maybe because of them, his mother had an ability to commune with the Force to find greater knowledge and wield greater power than anyone Nat knew.

He could only watch her. So did the Yuuzhan Vong. Two of them exchanged confused frowns, but the one who hovered closest to her, the one named Khat Lah, stared down with an expression that seemed to Nat almost envious.

After more than a minute, Jade opened her eyes and stood up. She wavered on her feet; Khat Lah put a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

She took a deep breath and said, "Something else happened here. These people were not killed by a bombardment."

Nat frowned. "The Jensaarai *were* here. We felt them die."

That wasn't exactly true. His mother, many old masters, and supposedly Kol had felt their dying agony flash in the Force. Nat, not as in-tune with the Force as them, had felt only a moment of physical weakness and understood nothing until it was explained to him afterward.

"Jensaarai died here. But they weren't incinerated from orbit." Jade shook her head. "There are... echoes here. Not just death. There's confusion. There's this... frantic energy. And anger. Much anger."

"I thought we'd taught the Jensaarai to turn away from their darker feelings."

"I'm not sure the anger is from the Jensaarai." She halted suddenly, like she was afraid to continue.

Nat stepped close. "What do you feel?"

"I'm not sure. But these echoes.... They remind me of the Sith more than anything."

It was a thought Nat didn't want to continue either. He'd faced Sith before. He and Treis Sinde had killed one on Hapes. That was almost thirty years ago, and he'd thought he'd never have to face one again.

"I'm not sure," Jade said hoarsely. "But... there was violence here. The dark side was used. Brutally."

"And all this?" He gestured to the broad black crater in which they stood.

"The enemy seeks to hide his actions," Khat Lah said. "Yet you felt them in the Force regardless, Master Skywalker? Does this mean the enemy underestimates you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't *know* anything for sure." Jade looked around the crater. "But we need to warn other Force-users that they might be in danger to."

"We can try," Nat said, "But frankly, I'm more worried about *us*. If this *is* the Sith—"

"Don't." Jade held up a hand. "Don't panic. Don't jump to conclusions. There are other options, which frankly scare me just as much. It *was* an Imperial frigate that blasted this place."

Nat rebelled against it. Maybe his periodic meetings with Treis Sinde clouded his judgement, but he couldn't believe Roan Fel would sanction a savage unprovoked slaughter, especially against fellow Force-users.

Jade sensed his thoughts again. "It's something we'll have to look into."

"I *will* look into it," Nat said. His mother didn't know about his meetings with Sinde, only Kol. He'd tell her now, but the Yuuzhan Vong were watching, three sets of curious eyes.

"Perhaps these Jensaarai made another enemy," Khat Lah suggested. "Perhaps there was a schism between them. Master Skywalker, you said they once embraced the Force's dark side."

"Not *embrace*, but they did use it." Jade frowned. "You're right, though. Thank you. We have to consider that possibility too."

"Is there nothing else we can learn here?" asked another warrior, Besh Lah.

Nat shook his head. "Soullex isn't exactly populous. I've questioned everyone here who might know something. I think it's time to pursue other lines of enquiry."

"You seem like you have a place to start," said Jade. Nat nodded. She reached out and squeezed her son's forearm. "Then get to it. I'll head back to Ossus and see if I can pull some Jedi off the front lines to help investigate this."

"Stay safe." He resisted a glance at the Vong.

"You too." She raised a smile, but he could feel her fear in the Force, clear as anything. That unsettled him as much as the vast black crater in which they stood.

It was a critical conversation, but Nyna Calixte found herself drawn to distraction. She hadn't heard anything from Darth Maladi since the capture of Botajef, and for once, she *wanted* to speak with the Sith witch again. Fel must have sent agents to investigate the Mandalorian situation by now. Maladi had assured that her people would deflect any inquiries, but Calixte believed the important things had to be done yourself. She could never trust Maladi, which meant she couldn't trust her own safety. At any moment the Emperor might accuse her of treason and haul her away. She'd barely slept in the past week.

She struggled to turn her attention to the flickering holo-image of Edouard Fenel, who was reporting from the currently-beseiged Botajef.

"The Alliance is still probing our defenses," the black-haired admiral said. "I think after the nasty surprise they got last time, they're a little timid. They've kept more than half their local fleet clustered at Contruum."

"If they threw that entire force at Botajef, they'd easily retake the planet." Veed, sitting across from Calixte at the conference table, shook his head. "That snake they have in charge can't bring himself to take the leap."

It was just like Veed to underestimate Admiral Slossar for being nonhuman. One would think he'd have learned his lesson after Lekhwash and Stazi.

"Their admiral might also fear a trap," Roan Fel pointed out. He sat at the oval table's head, draped in violet and silver finery, hands folded intently on the table. "Unfortunately, our forces aren't in position to stage one."

"I think *they* are the ones spreading themselves thing now," the holo of Admiral Sha Dun rasped. The Kel Dor commanded the frontline force based at Ord Lithone. "Their fleet at Contruum is split between defense and offense. And they've pulled their ships from Paqualis and Champala to protect Palanhi, haven't they?"

Admiral Kaylac, broadcasting from *Invincible* on the other edge of the Empire, said, "The Alliance has pulled more forces to Palanhi, but they seem to be taking defensive formation. Our fleet at Bilbringi still outmasses theirs by a third. They seem to have drawn most of those ships from the Hydian."

"What about the fleets that captured Admiral Reave?" Fel's eyes narrowed in thought. "Where are they? Where is Admiral Lekhwash?"

Eyes turned to Seniac. The intelligence director steepled his fingers. "Our spies say Lekhwash has retreated to Coruscant right now, surely to plan the next stage of the fighting. His battle group- and Admiral Gar Stazi's ships- are being held up at Rendili."

"They've been there for over a week," Calixte pointed out. "Haven't any ships moved out?"

Seniac shook his head. "I've been personally overseeing our spies there. Their reports are unanimous. The yards are over capacity and repairs are behind schedule. Several report supply chain issues are slowing the process."

"Then if we are to strike the Alliance," rasped Sha Dun, "We must attack soon."

"You propose a strike at the Hydian?" asked Fel.

"If we don't attack now, they'll force us on the back foot," Veed said. "I know we don't have the resources for a major push, but if we can grab critical worlds on the Hydian, fortify

and hold them, we'll prevent the Alliance was pressing into *our* space."

Calixte watched Fel carefully, watched him think. She knew the Emperor wanted a way out of this war; he had since the start. He also had pride and was loathe to go to the Alliance begging for mercy. A few worlds on the Hydian could salvage Imperial dignity when it came time to negotiate a treaty.

Veed saw the emperor's calculations and pressed further. "If we're going to make this strike it must come soon. It must be fast, limited, and *fierce*." He glanced at Sha Dun's holo. "The Third Fleet, naturally, should take part. I am more than willing to take a piece of the Bastion home fleet to his fight. I'm sure Admiral Keelu will be happy to bring her horde in. But what could *really* secure this victory is *Invincible*."

All eyes went to Kaylac. The admiral's holo-image nodded, soberly. "Since coming to Bilbringi I've been running combat drills and equipment checks. *Invincible* is read to be used in battle, either offensively or defensively."

"We cannot afford to fight defensively any longer," Veed said. "We *must* attack and we must use our mightiest first."

Fel's face was unreadable. His eyes slid to Seniac. "Director, monitor the Rendili ships closely. And track Lekhwash's location. If there's the hint of those are on the move, I may move to scrub this mission."

"But until then?" asked Veed.

"Apportion some of your fleet for an offensive. Work with admirals Kaylac and Sha Dun to prepare a battle plan. However, Admiral, your forces are *not* to lead the charge. Your ships will be held in reserve, if needed, to take Champala and Paqualis. And you will not disembark from the Braxant Sector until immediately before the battle. I don't want to give their spies more warning than necessary."

"I'll make sure of that, Majesty," said Seniac.

Calixte spent the rest of the meeting patiently watching the admirals hash out an initial battle plan. Sha Dun and Veed seemed eager for a fight; Kaylac not happy, but resolved. Admiral Fenel, from his bits of input, sounded like he

wanted to join the party. Roan Fel betrayed nothing. Not for the first time, Calixte wondered what mystic Force-powers might have shown her.

After the meeting was done, the senior officers dispersed through the halls of the Emperor's palace. Calixte waited until she and Veed were in private before saying, "You have what you want now. You're happy, aren't you?"

"Satisfied, Nyna. We can't allow ourselves to be put on the defensive. If it means risks, so be it. I'm glad Fel and Kaylac are finally seeing the light." He put a hand on her back, stroked it. "You seem distracted lately. Is something wrong?"

She wasn't about to tell him about her mysterious Sith contact, not yet. "I've been... concerned," she admitted.

"I understand," Veed smiled. "You're worried you made a mistake in backing this war."

"I'll admit that." He didn't know the half of it.

"Be confident, Nyna. Doubts don't suit you. Once the start taking pieces of the Hydian from them, we can really make them hurt. *Invincible* will see to that. Their Jedi cultists and alien commanders won't help them against that kind of firepower."

Calixte had a feeling firepower mattered less to this war than Jedi cultists, and their Sith opposites. The more she let herself think about it the more out-of-control and powerless she felt. It was an awful feeling, but she put on a smile for Veed.

"I'm sorry for my doubts," she said.

He kissed the side of her face. Rough, dry lips. "Perhaps I can visit your quarters later."

There was still a chance Maladi might surprise her. If Veed walked into that, well, it would end badly for her as well as him. "

"Good enough. I've got a new bottle of Whyren's Reserve I'd love to share."

"Corellian contraband? How could I resist?"

"Twenty-two hundred hours, then."

He kissed her again and slipped away, leaving Calixte alone in the cool empty hall. She felt a slight chill and looked

around. No Sith watchers, not that she could see. She cursed herself for a paranoid fool, then remembered she had every right to be. She hurried back to her chambers and found them empty. A little relieved, a little tense, she began preparing for the evening's duty.

The journey back to Ossus felt slow and grim. Besh Lah and Vua Yaght tried to distract themselves with sparring matches in the ship's hold, but Khat Lah needed something else. He couldn't turn away from the slaughter he'd seen at Soulllex. He needed, more than anything, to understand it, and the only one who could help him with that was Jade Skywalker.

He and the Jedi woman sat on the floor of small emptied cabin, legs crossed, facing each other in relaxed versions of the meditative pose he'd seen many Jedi use.

"I have heard of these Sith before," he said. "I'd thought they were destroyed. Do you really believe they are responsible for what happened at Soulllex?"

"I'm not certain. But what I felt there, the echoes in the Force... they reminded me of the Sith I've fought."

"What did it feel like, those echoes?" He leaned forward, intent. He knew he'd never fully understand what it was like to use the Force, to commune with specters of life even when those lives were gone, but he could try.

Jade considered her words. "When I felt the emotions of others, they were weaker than my own, but no less authentic. And when I felt that anger and fear and despair on Soulllex, I felt them *here*." She tapped the center of her chest. "A little bit of me *became* the people who'd fought and died there."

"Through the Force, you share in their lives," Khat Lah surmised. "Even those of the Sith."

"I suppose you could see it that way." She bowed her head, breathed deeply. "When I was very young... my mother was killed by a Sith. I felt that pain and fear and anger, and it stayed with me a long time. Whenever I touched the Force, I touched that pain. It took me many years, and a lot of *other* pain, to find a way to use the Force freely."

"But you are a *Jeedai* Master. One of the greatest."

Jade shook her head. "I'm just an old woman. And I never wanted to be a great... anything. No. That's not true." She allowed a wry smile. "I wanted to be a great mother to my sons."

"You have succeeded. They're both fine *Jeedai* as well."

"If you were anyone else, I'd say you were trying to flatter me," she chuckled. "So thank you, Khat Lah, for the compliments."

He nodded appreciation, but his thoughts drew back to darker places. "I know *Jeedai* and Sith have warred for millennia, but I do not truly understand the distinction. There are other sects that draw on the Force, but they do not battle like yours do."

"Jedi and Sith have opposite ways of using the Force. In using the Force, Jedi *surrender* themselves. We make ourselves an instrument of its power."

"Yet you use the Force to work your will, in large ways and small."

"We do. And there's a paradox there. If our will is in accordance with the will of the Force, then power flows easily. And Sith are not like that. They *wrench* power from the Force and mold it to their own ends. Their use is inherently selfish."

Khat Lah considered that. "When my ancestors performed... horrors against this galaxy, they thought they were doing the will of the Gods. They died willingly to slaughter infidels. Selflessness is no guarantee of virtue."

Jade gave a little smile. "That's a very keen point. But then, your gods are not the Force."

"That is unclear." Khat Lah still believed, still hoped, the Gods were in some way a representation of the Force. Perhaps they were a misrepresentation, but they were the only means of connecting with his invisible, life-giving power the Yuuzhan Vong had. They had to mean *something*.

"I have heard it said that the original Yuuzhan'tar *stripped* us from the Force," he told Jade. "Perhaps that event caused us to fall toward false gods. Perhaps the false gods are what made Yuuzhan'tar abandon us."

"I can't help you with that," Jade said. "But I do know that individual Jedi have been stripped of the Force before."

"Truly?"

"Most instances happened in ancient times. They're barely more than names now. Ulic Qel-Droma. Meetra Surik. Jedi used power so dark it damaged the Force and had to be cut off from it. I suppose, if Yuuzhan'tar was powerful enough, it could have stripped your whole race of that connection. But Qel-Droma and Surik *did* regain their power, eventually."

"How?" He leaned forward, tense.

"The stories are vague." Jade smiled apologetically. "They seemed to have found news ways within themselves to connect to the Force."

"I had heard that Jeedai connect to the Force using..." He stumbled for the half-familiar word. "Medli-korians."

"Midi-chlorians." She ran her right-hand fingers against the back of her left, tracing faint blue blood vessels. "They exist in our bodies. In our cells. But they don't *give* us the Force. They're conduits through which we access it. Generally, more midi-chlorians in one's cells means more Force potential, but those alone don't make you a Jedi. Or a Sith. It's about teaching and training, the changes we make *within* ourselves that define how we touch the Force."

"They don't exist in my people."

She nodded. "Our scientists have confirmed that."

"But this Ulic Qel-Droma and Meetra Surik... When they lost the Force, were they robbed of midi-chlorians? And if they still *had* these... things in their cells, how could they lose the Force?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. These things all happened thousands of years ago." Her brows narrowed. Her voice went soft. "But there was one Jedi... He was stripped of the Force for a short time, then regained it. This happened during your people's invasion, just a hundred years ago."

Khat Lah stiffened. "Truly?"

"Your people knew him as Jacen Solo."

He knew that name. He also knew this Jedi later became Sith, took a new name and wrought great damage. Yet to the

Yuuzhan Vong, he was still remembered as one who'd turned their people away from false gods and set them on course for redemption.

"Jacen Solo was stripped of the Force by his mentor," Jade explained. "He was led into grave danger and made to face it alone, without friends or allies or the Force he'd depended on all his life. He was reduced to nothing more than himself, what was in his mind and heart... It was only when he'd mastered what was inside him that Jacen found the Force again."

Khat Lah looked down at his hands. It was only once he'd starting spending time with this old woman that he'd come to realize how badly he yearned to reach beyond the limitations of his species, his society, his history. The Force was always outside his grasp, tantalizing and frustrating, mysterious and powerful. He didn't know what he'd do if he could touch the Force. Perhaps his willfulness and inner anger might turn him into the most vile Sith. Still, he yearned to find out.

As though she'd sensed his thoughts, Jade said, "The Force is not an answer. The Force is not a purpose and it will not make you whole. The Force would not solve your problems, even if you could touch it."

"Then what *is* the Force?"

She looked around the empty cabin, spread her hands. "The Force is *life*. And just like life, the Force is what we make of it. The Force is someone else's mystery, Khat Lah. Focus on yourself, what lies in your heart and mind. Make a peace for yourself there, because it's the only place any of us ever find it."

Success left Eshkar Niin restless. After meeting up with Draco and Marin they retreated to the landing zone, where *Runaround* was waiting locked and secure. By the time he explained everything to them it was nearly midnight local time and they were tired by the day's work. It was agreed that they'd spend one last night on Mandalore. Come morning Marin would return their rented speeder bikes while the two Imperial Knights could compose a report to the emperor. All that done, they'd depart.

Draco slept that night; so did Marin. Niin tried to follow that path and failed. Still he was restless, too restless. His disappointment had grown since leaving the warehouse, becoming a heavy pall. The memory of paranoia's sharp spike echoed inside him.

When he rose from his bed he knew it was foolish. He knew, too that it was foolish to put on his equipment and cloak, to slip out into the dead of night, and make his way back toward the warehouse without giving his apprentice any warning. He did it anyway.

Something else compelled him; a hint of memory, a touch from the Force. He wanted to believe that and perhaps it was true, but Eshkar Niin knew himself and he knew his judgement was compromised. He'd never liked to lose, and this apparent victory made him feel worse than any defeat.

He got on the speeder bike and worked his way steadily through empty streets until he reached the industrial zone. After that he ascended to the top of a building and worked his way across rooftops with Force-assisted bounds. Unerringly, he made his way back to the warehouse. He didn't know what he'd find, but something- the Force, delusion, conviction- was reeling him back.

Niin came to the hatch he'd entered before and paused, reaching out with the Force to sense any lives inside. He felt a handful; they seemed preoccupied with something else. Niin dropped onto the catwalk, silent once again. He looked down to where they'd held Govum Haugh earlier and saw the chair was still there. Two Falleen and a black-armored Mandalorian- Auch's bodyguard, perhaps- seemed to be doing clean-up.

Niin hesitated; if he took them by surprise the Falleen would be easy to dispatch, the Mando harder. He'd never fought an enemy with lightsaber-proof *beskar* before, but to get information he'd have to take them captive.

He was thinking hard how to attack when he felt a stirring in the Force; something behind him. He spun around, reached for his lightsaber, and didn't turn it on before a large three-toed foot pounded him in the chest and knocked him off the catwalk.

Even in panic he reached out with the Force, corrected and softened his fall. When his boots slammed onto the duracrete floor he flicked his lightsaber on and sent out a wave of Force energy that knocked the Falleen and the Mandalorian away. He skirted back from them and looked up to see, of all things, a tall Blood Carver with what looked like jagged black tattoos writ across its natural gold skin. The Blood Carver stared down at him from its perch on the catwalk but didn't jump to intervene.

Niin's other foes were already in motion. The Falleen pulled out blaster pistols. Niin charged ahead, ducked low and slammed his shoulder into one's gut, then spun, kicking him away and cutting through his partner's pistol with his saber.

Niin jumped back from the downed Falleen and turned to face the Mandalorian. To his surprise, the black-armored figure had no blaster in his hand. Instead, he clutched a gnarled staff as long as a forearm, one that look almost like-a lightsaber.

When the red blade extended from its forward end, Niin felt someone touch him in the Force, mocking him.

Before he could charge, he heard the slam of a heavy body hitting ground behind him. Niin knew the Blood Carver had dropped down; he spun, brought up his saber, and blocked the second red blade. He tried to reach out with the Force, awaken Draco, tell him what was happening, but sudden agony seized him. Blue lightning took him from behind, danced across his body, and forced the lightsaber from his trembling hands.

The saber immediately went to the Blood Carver's grip. When the lightning stopped Niin found himself on his knees. White and red light glowed light scissor-blades at his neck, ready to neatly snip off his head. Behind him, he could feel that black-armored Mandalorian looming.

Not a Mandalorian. A Sith.

The realization blasted away all other thoughts. He grappled with it, tried to understand, failed. Only then did he receive a second shock: he was still alive. Captive and at their mercy instead, which was so much worse.

Shame burned within him, and shame became anger. He stared up at the Blood Carver's small red-gold eyes and said, "I am Eshkar Niin, Imperial Knight."

"We know who you are," the Blood Carver said.

"How are you here? The Sith... We destroyed you thirty years ago."

"The Sith embody the Force's dark side. We can no more be destroyed than the Force can."

Niin swallowed. "Kill me." He wanted them to. Better to end the shame. Better than enduring whatever these monsters had planned for him.

"Perhaps." The Blood Carver regarded him. "We know of you, Eshkar Niin. We've heard you're a master of strategy. Of schemes and plots. Do you appreciate ours?"

Something new broke through shame and anger: realization. That black-armored warrior behind him had touched him in the Force earlier tonight. What Niin had seen before had been a show put on for his benefit; everything that had happened here on Mandalore had been such. He'd thought he was snaring his enemies in a trap, but they'd snared him instead.

That should have added more shame and anger, but Niin's mind kept working. He understood that he *had* been chasing the prized quarry after all. The Sith were Yaga Auch's secret backer, just as they'd backed his uncle decades before. If the Sith were behind Auch's they were behind Calixte too, and behind-

"All of it. This whole war... It was your doing." He couldn't keep awe from his voice. "The Ossus Project... Did you ruin that too?"

"Yes," the Blood Carver said simply.

Niin moved his neck a few centimeters from the blades; they didn't strike. He twisted his head a little to see the other Sith. He'd removed his black helmet, revealing a gaunt pure-white face framed by tangled black hair. A Nagai, perhaps.

Niin looked back at the Blood Carver. "A master. An apprentice. Or are there more of you?"

"Many more. But only One Sith. My name is Darth Vorkan."

Niin looked back at the Nagai. "And do you have a name?"

"No," the other said, and nothing else.

Niin didn't understand, but it didn't matter. To the Blood Carver he asked, "Were you waiting here for me? Was this a trap?"

"We expected Emperor Fel to send his agents to Mandalore. We didn't know how you'd come at us, but we were prepared." He removed the white lightsaber from Niin's neck and gestured to the unconscious Falleen. "Killing Fel's Knights would have drawn more, so we put on a show you could take back to your emperor. That you weren't convinced- that you came back here tonight- says something about you, Eshkar Niin."

It said that he was a fool. Niin gritted his teeth. "The Emperor will know everything that happened here. If you don't kill me, I will take it back to him."

"Perhaps." Vorkan's voice grew thoughtful. "And what will happen *then*, Master Niin?"

"We will root out Sith influence in the Empire. Calixte and your other pawns will be imprisoned. *Your* kind will be hunted down and killed. We did it thirty years ago—"

"That cost you your previous emperor, and its crown prince. And *we* are still here. Unlike an empire, the Sith are indestructible. And if you *do* move against the Sith, we will take your empire with us."

"A small price to pay," Niin said, but his voice wavered. He wasn't certain. For the Sith to have concocted this war their influence must be vast and insidious. They could surely do grave damage to the Empire, and the Empire had already been damaged in its losing fight against the Alliance.

"The Sith *made* your empire," Vorkan hissed. "It is Darth Sidious' creation, even now. Under the One Sith it can reach those heights again. Are you not *loyal* to the Empire, Master Niin?"

"I am loyal to my emperor and empress."

"Even if you- and they- succeed in purging our influence, what will be left? The whole galaxy will see Roan Fel for what he is: a hapless leader, outwitted by his own moffs, unfit to wear his father's crown and shoulder his family's

legacy. A man who let his Empire be humiliated and beaten until it's a shard of its former self. Is that the legacy you'd leave, Master Niin?"

"Anything to defeat the Sith," Niin said, and again his voice wavered. During this long hunt for the war's architect he'd fancied himself the hero who'd uncover the secret enemy and trap them. He realized now it was all vanity; against the Sith he'd never had a chance. Their plot had ensnared the Empire fully; the Sith might survive the fall of the Empire but the Empire could never survive the fall of the Sith. He, Eshkar Niin, master strategist, protector the emperor and empress, was nothing against them.

He wanted Vorkan to take his head off right there; *needed* it. There was no way he could live with his shame. He summoned the Force and tried to wrench his white blade from Vorkan's hand. He almost pulled it from that three-fingered grip but the Nagai kicked him hard in the side. Niin spilled onto the cold duracrete, curled half-fetal, body wrenched with pain, as pathetic as he'd ever been. The Nagai kicked him again, harder. Pain fueled hate and anger and Niin rolled onto his back; when the Nagai came in for another kick he let his anger take form, howled out loud, and unleashed a wash of sizzling blue-white light.

It staggered the Nagai, driving him back, but Vorkan unleashed a blast of his own, catching Niin, wracking him with more pain. As it shuddered through his body the Imperial Knight felt drained, emptied by that release of raw hatred that was like anything he'd ever done before.

As Niin lay on his back, smoking and panting, Vorkan hovered above him, silhouetted by the overhead glare.

"You have power and will," the Blood Carver said. "A shame you've never been taught to use them properly."

"I am... an Imperial Knight," Niin gasped. "I serve... the emperor... and the *light* side of the Force."

"Do you, truly?" Vorkan leaned closer. "You have such pride, Master Niin. I can feel it. I can feel its wounds. Don't you want to heal them?"

He would give anything to do so, but he couldn't see a way. The Sith were true masters. They hadn't merely outplayed

him, they'd created a game in which ever player lost before they even knew they *were* playing.

"You do not have to lose," Vorkan said, as though he'd read Niin's mind. "You only have to choose the winning side."

"No," Niin rasped at once. "I will never... *never* join you."

"The galaxy is already in our hands. You know this. We are doing you a *favor*, Master Niin, because you are intelligent and driven."

"I'm an Imperial Knight... no *Sith*." He said it like the cruelest curse, but they were right. In manufacturing this war they'd already won. It was a masterstroke Darth Sidious would have admired.

"Then stand up, Knight, and take the truth to Roan Fel. Tell him what you've found and doom your empire."

Niin didn't move. He stared at Darth Vorkan's black shape and thought. If the Sith really let him go, he could take this information to the emperor, reveal the truth, and doom them all. Or he could hold it close and seek some way to preserve the Empire, to outwit the Sith. He could lure them into false confidence. He could use them as they'd used him.

His heart thrilled at the thought, but he knew vanity lay beneath it, as it laid beneath everything. Still, Niin saw no other option. He could play their game, their rigged game, and seek some way to surprise them.

Niin sat upright, propped on his elbow. He looked at the two Sith and said, "I will the protect the Empire. I will not break that vow."

"*We* are the Empire now," said Darth Vorkan. "Would you serve us?"

Niin licked dry lips. "What do you want from me?"

"We have agents on Bastion, but no Imperial Knight," the Nagai said.

"I will not kill the emperor or the empress."

"We only seek... information," Vorkan said. "And certainty that we remain hidden, until we chose to reveal ourselves."

Of course they'd step into the open eventually. On that day Niin would be ready for them. He swore it to himself.

"I can help you," he said. "But I will not harm the emperor or empress."

"Very well." Vorkan took a step back. "Rise, Master Niin. You may walk free now. Tell no one what transpired tonight. When you return to Bastion, tell them the story we created for them. Once you do... we will contact you again."

The Sith watched as the Iktotchi knight stood on unsteady legs. Niin took back his lightsaber and walked out of the warehouse, slowly, horned head bowed with shame and new weight. When he was finally gone, apprentice turned to master and said, "We should have killed him. Do you really believe he'll stay silent?"

"I do," said Darth Vorkan.

"Why? I could feel his loyalty. No Imperial Knight has ever broken his vows."

"There is always a first. His loyalty derives from his pride, and we've already dealt that a mortal blow. The only way he'll regain it is to work with us."

"You wish to make him One Sith? A Lord?"

"Turning one of Roan Fel's own has always been a goal for Lord Krayt. This one has the pride, the ambition, and the anger needed to become Sith." Vorkan's mouth cracked open and a hiss escaped his fine teeth. "He will convince himself he is using us, and allow himself to be lead deeper into the dark. Do not doubt, apprentice. Eshkar Niin is already ours."

Chapter Sixteen

As he watched explosions blossom like scarlet time-lapse flowers against the gentle blue face of Champala, Jaius Yorub allowed himself a moment of respect for his Imperial adversaries. Even when stuck in a trap, they fought hard.

Everything had been going according to plan so far. The Imperials had launched a double-pronged attack at Champala and Paqualis both. Every fighting-fit ship from the Fifth had jumped to Champala and erected a wide interdiction field that trapped the Imperials with their backs to the planet's orbital defense platforms, which had been quickly and quietly improved less than a week before. Trapped with enemies on either side, the two Imperial battle groups had separated from each other and formed tight formations. They held positions as distant from the orbital stations as they could manage while daring the Alliance ships to attack.

Admiral Stazi had taken the dare. *Indomitable* was among a dozen Mon Cal heavy cruisers charging a tight-packed cluster of star destroyers. Their advance frigates, forward pickets, and starfighter wings were already lighting up space with constant explosions and strobing laser-blasts. The flagship had yet to come under direct fire but a glance at the tactical holo told him it was only a matter of time. A wing of heavy TIE Neutralizers, with Predators as escorts, had slipped past the Alliance pickets and was beginning to attack the capital ships.

It would be a fierce fight ahead, but Yorub was glad for one thing. *Invincible* had directed its assault to Paqualis, which

meant it was Admiral Lekhwash's problem. According to the last report received from Paqualis, the First Fleet was doing just that, throwing smaller ships at the larger one and trying to match it, might against might.

As warheads from the first TIE Neutralizers impacted on *Indomitable's* forward shields, Yorub hurried over to the communications station and requested a link with the Jedi squadron. They were paired with Ayen Qemar again, and after a moment he heard the Nautolan's voice scratch over the comm.

"Standing by for orders, Captain."

"We are currently under assault by enemy bombers. Mark their position and clear them."

"Understood."

"I'll send squads of Crossfires to help you. When you're done, return to the front line. We're going to have to push into their formation and break it apart."

"That will get bloody, Captain."

"I'm well aware. Clear the bombers first."

"We will."

When the line shut off, he told the comm officer to relay matching orders to *Indomitable's* three Crossfire squads. Then the Sullustan hurried across the deck to the tactical station, where Admiral Stazin was studying the display. He glanced sideways out the viewport, and saw more explosions impact *Indomitable's* shields. Thankfully, no hits were landing near the bridge, at least not yet.

"I told the Jedi to clear out the bombers," Yorub reported. "After that, they're to form up front so we can make a push."

Stazi looked down at his captain. "You've decided that, have you?"

Yorub blinked his big eyes. "Wasn't that your strategy?"

"It is, and you were right to give the order. But look here." Stazi pointed to spots on the Imperial formation's right flank, then the left. They were the spots closest to Champala's orbital stations, and the Imperials seemed to have allocated those locations to combat carriers more armored than they were armed.

"You want to split formation?" asked Yorub.

Stazi nodded. "We may not be able to smash through them, but we can still go around them and break them apart from the inside. Jedi fighters will be essential to that."

"What about the second Imp fleet?"

They turned their attention to the battle happening on the opposite side of the planet. Though invisible behind Champala's blue sphere, the other half of the Fifth was engaged in much the same fight, advancing on a tight and powerful formation of Imperial ships.

"We'll try a more straightforward strategy there and charge their forward line," Stazi said thoughtfully. "By differing out attacks we'll keep the Imperials on their toes."

"That sounds ideal to me, sir."

"Just remember, Captain, we may have to withdraw on short notice. This battle isn't about defending Champala. The real fight is over at Paqualis. Victory today will be determined by what happens to *Invincible*. Nothing more, nothing less."

Yorub nodded. He had no problem playing a supporting role, especially when the lead actors were facing a more brutal fight by far.

A year into this war and Kol's heart still raced when he stood on a warship's bridge during battle. *Krakana's* command deck surged and shuddered, nearly throwing him off his feet, and he braced himself against the back of a crewman's chair. It would do the Jedi no credit if he spilled across the deck in the middle of battle.

Admiral Lekhwash barely budged. The Quarren's mouth-tentacles twitched and he stared at the tactical display, eyes narrowed in thought. In the battle over Paqualis III, the world itself was secondary. The Alliance fleet gathered around *Invincible's* giant sword-shaped body to attack from all vectors. The Imperials, of course, were putting a fight, not only with the super star destroyer, but with the smaller destroyers and frigates that made up its support fleet. They were aided, too, by the miss-matched warships of their allies, the same who'd attacked Ossus at the start of this war. In a way Admiral Keelu's ships were just as dangerous as the

mighty Imperial ones; their corvettes and frigates made fast and brazen attacks, slipping in and out of Alliance lines, pounding hard and falling back as starfighters nipped their aft shields.

One of those corvettes blazed past *Krakana*'s bridge after delivering a deck-shaking volley of missiles. Despite the able Jedi and Alliance snubfighter pilots flying interference, there seemed to be no stopping the irregulars' stinging attacks. It was making it harder than ever to focus on their main target.

Steady on his feet, more or less, Kol sidled to Lekhwash. "We won't be able to attack *Invincible* if we're constantly watching out for Keelu's ships."

"I'm aware." Lekhwash pointed to one marker on the tactical holo, a red light off *Invincible*'s bow. "That's Keelu's flagship, *Recompense*. I'm going to order an attack on her. I don't expect it to draw *all* her ships away from us, but it should draw *some*, and that will make the rest easier to deal with."

"Are you trying to destroy *Recompense*?"

"Ideally, yes, though I'm not sure if its destruction would much affect Keelu's troops." The Quarren crossed his arms. "Even if we *do* drive them off, we'll still have the Imperials, which will be no small challenge. If you Jedi can come up with a way to break this stalemate, it would be vastly appreciated."

There were Jedi pilots out there in their Twintails, led by Lowbacca. If Kol sunk into the Force, even a little, he could feel their battle-meld like a beckon. It pulsed with urgency, adrenaline, and restrained panic, and Lowbacca was doing all he could to hold it together. If Kol wanted to, he could join it and send some constancy to the battling pilots, but that alone was not enough to turn the battle.

He was jarred from his thoughts by a commotion on the bridge. He looked out the forward viewport and saw one of Keelu's corvettes take a heavy missile volley from a Mon Cal sabertooth. The Alliance cruiser's barrage broke the corvette's hull open, spilling fire and debris. The blow should have knocked it away, but the corvette's engines fired one dying burst that pitched its nose toward the sabertooth.

The corvette's engines sputtered and died, but it kept falling toward the cruiser. Kol braced himself as the corvette slammed into the larger ship's shields, pushed through them, and tore into the hull. The sabertooth did not explode from the impact but its hull was torn open, spilling more wreckage. Its engines died and even as the lights went out over its hull, interior fires flickered through viewports and spread throughout the ship.

Admiral Lekhwash barked orders, commanding nearby cruisers to tractor the sabertooth out of the battle zone and launch recovery teams. Kol felt grief and consternation from *Krakana's* crew; the loss of that one cruiser would not cripple the fleet, but it would distract and inconvenience the entire Alliance formation.

And as Kol considered this, he got an idea. It was a desperate and dangerous idea, one that might not even work, but if it did it would break the impasse and decisively turn the battle.

He looked sideways, caught Lekhwash's narrowed eyes, and realized the admiral was having the exact same thought.

Though the Jedi pilots had spent most of the fight communicating solely through their battle meld, Kol commed Lowbacca directly from *Krakana's* bridge to explain the new strategy. It was a mad plan, something Lowbacca might have expected from Jaina or Han Solo, but Kol insisted Lekhwash had approved it. As if to confirm that, squadrons of old durable D-wing bombers were vectoring to rendezvous with the Jedi Twintails.

Lowbacca switched his comm channel and shared this with his other squad leaders, Karrashchakuk and Wolf Sazen, who in turn relayed the information to their teams. The Jedi fighters, loosely scattered in the open zone between *Krakana's* battle group and *Invincible's* aft, tightened formation and were joined by the D-wings.

"This is Smasher One reporting," a human-sounding voice buzzed in Lowbacca's ear. "Requesting Jedi assistance, on the admiral's orders."

There was no telling if this one understood Shyriiwook, so the answer came from Sazen. “Affirmative, we’ve been informed of the battle plan. Suggest you break into trios. We’ll split squadrons to cover you.”

“Understood.” After a tiny pause Smasher One added, “Looks like things are moving.”

Lowbacca checked his scanners. As Kol had said, an Alliance battle group was pushing closer to *Invincible*’s bow, but instead of firing on the Imperial behemoth they were attacking Admiral Keelu’s *Recompense*, the lone star destroyer in the Rodian admiral’s ragtag fleet. Some of Keelu’s ships, which had been harassing the Alliance, pulled back to defend the flagship. From what Lowbacca’s scanners showed, only a third or so did so; the rest remained amidst the Alliance ships, stinging like angry hornets.

It would make their job easier and tougher at the same time. Lowbacca gave a roar, and Sazen told the Alliance pilots, “We’re ready to go.”

“Understood,” said Smasher One. “Breaking formation now.”

The D-wing squads separated into flights and began breaking on different vectors, each trio aiming for a different corvette or fast frigate preying on the Alliance lines. With wordless ease, the Jedi pilots split their own squads and began flying cover for the D-wings, four Twintails to a bomber trio.

It was a boon that Keelu’s ships had poor fighter cover. The corvettes and frigates were protected by starfighters ranging from antiquated to ancient, including some X-wings and E-wings that looked almost as old as Lowbacca himself. The Jedi fighters lanced ahead of the D-wings and nimbly picked off the enemy snubfighters. Lowbacca himself shot down two merely-antiquated Tri-wings and his wingmates cleared away the rest, leaving the battered enemy corvette vulnerable to runs from the D-wings.

Like the B-wing fighter/bombers they descended from, D-wings were designed to take on capital ships directly, but their carrying capacity had been enhanced to include non-standard weapons like ion torpedoes. Lowbacca and his

wingmates swooped down on the corvette and began pummeling its port-side shields with laserfire, following by a burst of missiles. The D-wings deployed seconds later, one ion torpedo each. Lowbacca Force-signaled the Jedi to hold their fire when the ion torps got close, and he watched with satisfaction as the warheads slipped through the momentary gap the Jedi had carved in the corvette's shields. The warheads impacted raw hull, smashed through metal, and sent blue lightning surging out from the impact-wounds. Lowbacca's fighter shot past the corvette and he pulled into a sharp turn to keep it in view. The other Jedi kept formation, and they watched as the corvette's engines shuddered and died. It still drifted ahead on inertia, and Lowbacca saw that its current course and speed would send it smashing into a nearby Mon Cal cruiser. The Mon Cal ship could pummel the unshielded corvette with missiles, tearing up the hull, but even then debris might overwhelm its shields and do considerable damage.

"Target is down," Smasher One said. "The rest's up to you, Jedi!"

Lowbacca gave a single affirmative roar, then kicked his starfighter ahead. On his Force-signal the other Jedi joined him, and together all four fighters raced ahead of the corvette. They cut power to engines and used directional repulsors to spin their ships nose-over-tail so that they drifted backwards with the dark corvette looming in their forward viewport.

All four Jedi reached out with the Force. They touched each other's minds first, shunting away all the chaos of the battle and their meld with the other pilots. Four minds merged as one, under Lowbacca's guidance, and they reached outward with a strong and single hand to catch the careening corvette. It required great strain from all his pilots; even without blazing engines, mass and inertia were powerful forces. Lowbacca felt his breath grow short, felt sweat prickle around the fur of his face, but he continued to push back against the corvette's forward motion.

Suddenly he felt resistance ebb, as the corvette settled totally motionless in the vacuum. He opened his eyes and saw the dark hull dead ahead with a pair of Alliance repair

tugs settled on its aft, tractor beams engaged. He saw, too, escape pods drifting out in all directions and it filled him with relief. In what came next, he wished to kill as few beings as possible.

He heard a new voice, possible from the tug. "That was good, Jedi, but we're just getting started."

On *Krakana's* frenzied bridge, right in front of the foremost viewport's curved panel, Kol Skywalker sat cross-legged on the deck, eyes closed, back stiff in a proper Jedi mediation pose. He knew he drew curious and incredulous looks from the crew, themselves all stressed and frantic for the fierce battle, but he tuned out their minds, turned out Lekhwash's shouted orders, tuned out everything except the collective Force-presence of the Jedi pilots out there in the battle zone.

He reached out to them, touched them, calmed them and loaned what strength he could. The Jedi, still tucked inside their starfighters, were gathered in sets of four behind a total of eleven disabled corvettes and frigates. The Alliance fleet tenders had dragged those dead ships to the front of the line, but now it would be the Jedi's duty to push them further.

Kol felt the Jedi minds, some strange, some very familiar. Kol felt Lowbacca and his son Karrashchakuk, locked in concentration as they joined with the others to raise invisible hands and push the starships toward *Invincible*. He felt his own apprentice doing the same and sent a pulse of encouragement to Wolf Sazen. The Zabrak didn't return it; he was putting everything he had into accelerating a dead corvette.

As he joined them Kol surrendered to the Force in the way his mother had taught him. He put aside all doubt and anxieties, all the burdens he'd shouldered over the past few years. It felt like being dropped into an ocean, and the plunge sent a thrill of fear through him, but he let the fear pass through, let himself plunge into those waters, let himself be pushed and pulled through its great current and in doing so became the current, surrendering self to direct a much greater power.

He lost all awareness of Lekhwash and the bridge crew, even the hard deck beneath him. Kol knew and saw and felt what the other Jedi did as they shoved their captive warships forward toward the super star destroyer. They came at the target from different angles but always with *Invincible* and Paqualis III ahead of them, so that the planet's gravity grabbed the crippled ships and pulled them forward with increasing velocity. The Imperials opened fire, of course, frantically tearing at the corvettes and frigates as they accelerated, but the rest of the Alliance fleet was attacking too, forcing them to spread their fire in all directions. Trails of fighters and bombers fell in behind the Jedi, shielded from heavy turbolaser fire by the captive corvettes.

Kol saw all this without opening his eyes. He knew the moment when the first corvette, pushed along by Wolf and his wingmates, smashed into a two-kilometer-long *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer and ripped open everything between its bow and hangar bays. He felt Karrash and company smash a big frigate into Admiral Keelu's flagship, and he felt the sudden painful loss of life as *Recompense*'s hull collapsed and explosions sparked its forward missile magazines, making a greater pyre still. Because he was a Jedi he mourned those lives lost, even though they'd once meant to destroy Ossus and his family. He let grief pass over him like fear and he felt the fervor of the Alliance fighters and bombers as they started bombarding what was left of *Recompense*, chewing up its unprotected hall with laser blasts, torpedoes, and concussion missiles.

And he felt the last flight of Jedi shove their battering ram free. He felt Lowbacca's surge of triumph as the captured corvette smashed against *Invincible*'s bow shields, broke through, and punched a billowing crater in its expansive hull.

He felt the Jedi's battle-meld weaken as they were drawn apart in different engagements. The fight had reached a new phase, more messy and deadly, and when Kol opened his eyes and let the sights and sounds and Force-sensations of *Krakana*'s bridge return to him, he was overwhelmed by their urgency. The deck shuddered, sending tremors through his body, as explosions and energy scatter spread across the

bridge's forward shields. Still seated on the deck he twisted his body and looked at the tactical holo. Lekhwash was there, barking orders. Imperial and Alliance vessels were all tangled together now. The Jedi's mad tactic had punched large holes in the Imperial lines, knocking out multiple star destroyers, but *Invincible* was still fighting strong, bringing its massive armament to bear as Alliance ships attacked from all sides.

Kol's eyes met Lekhwash's. The Jedi started to uncross his legs and rise, but Lekhwash trotted across the deck toward him.

"The plan worked splendidly, Master Jedi," the admiral said.

"*Invincible* still has a lot of fight let in her."

"I'm aware, and the Imperials aren't backing down. Taking out Admiral Keelu's flagship doesn't seem to have slowed her associates either, not that I expected it to."

Kol looked back out into space. The shield scatter had died down, revealing the long white sword of *Invincible* lying dead ahead, stretching from one end of the viewport to another. Despite several smoking pits in its hull, most of its body remained shielded.

"If you'd like to continue communing with your fellow Jedi and lending them strength," Lekhwash said, "Please do so. I have the situation in hand here."

Kol's brows furrowed. Lekhwash saw the question and his mouth-tentacles curled up in what Kol had learned was the Quarren equivalent of a confident grin. "Trust me, Master Jedi. We did not bait, set, and spring this trap to let our quarry escape now."

When *Indomitable* dropped out of hyperspace it brought two-thirds of its battle group with it. The other third was still at Champala, fighting a holding action against the many Imperial ships still gathered there. The offensive stage of that fight was over; the Fifth Fleet ships left behind had instead formed defensive walls around their interdictor cruisers with the express goal of preventing the Imperials from jumping to hyperspace and reinforcing their friends at Paqualis III.

When their orders had come down Yorub had balked, but Admiral Stazi understood immediately. While the Imperials were still pinned close to Champala, the interdictors had dropped their drag fields, allowing the bulk of the Alliance fleet to jump to the Paqualis system. It was indeed an all-out attack; *Invincible* was battling for its life, surrounded by a corona of flashing explosions and darting laserblasts. As *Indomitable* dove toward the battle in low orbit, Yorub's keen eyes spotted an explosion rip the entire starboard flank off a *Pellaeon*-class star destroyer, while another destroyer's barrage ripped the scythe off a Mon Cal cruiser. It was probably the fiercest fighting Yorub had seen this war, and the fighting with the highest stakes.

As he bent over the shoulders of two gunnery officers, pointing them toward certain targets, he heard Stazi over at the comm station, and looked back to see the admiral speaking with Lekhwash's flickering holo-image. Yorub snapped off a few last orders to the gunner and trotted across the bridge. He reached Stazi just as the holo shut off.

"Fresh orders, sir?"

"We keep the old ones, Captain." Stazi turned his eyes toward the tactical holo. "All we have to do is attack."

Yorub had been expecting that one.

The moment the second Alliance fleet joined the fighting at Paqualis III, Nyna Calixte knew the battle was lost. Since the Alliance had sprung its simultaneous traps she'd clung desperately to the hope that Kaylac and Veed might be able to fight their ways out of this. They'd put in admirable effort; Veed and Admiral Sha Dun had dropped into defensive formations over Champala and made the Alliance pay for every ship they destroyed. Over at Paqualis III, Admiral Keelu's fleet had done an admirable job harassing the Alliance while a barricade of star destroyers formed around *Invincible*, forbidding any attack.

She still wasn't entirely clear how the Alliance had turned the Paqualis fight around, but the Jedi must have played a role. Admiral Keelu's ship had been smashed open and chewed apart; nobody knew if the rogue Rodian was still

alive. Three star destroyers had taken heavy damage in that initial charge, and then the Alliance fell on *Invincible* like a pack of piranha-beetles, poundings its faltering shields with endless attacks.

Now that their second fleet had joined the fight, jumping from Champala while leaving a token force there to keep Veed and Sha Dun pinned, the Alliance finally had a decisive advantage. The observation room deep within the Imperial Palace on Bastion was plunged into grim silence as all present watched the Alliance overwhelm the defending star destroyers and pummel *Invincible* again and again. There were simply too many attackers to defend against, too many targets to hit.

Invincible was a mighty ship but an old one, older than Calixte herself. It had been commissioned before Davek Fel had declared himself Emperor and had, for nearly a decade, been used by Fel's opponent Corrien Veers as *his* flagship. On Veers' defeat the super star destroyer had changed owners again and become a symbol of the Fel Emperors' might. *Invincible*, that great white sword of a warship, had been like a scepter of rank for all claiming to be master of the Empire.

As she watched the disaster play out on the holo-display, Calixte sometimes glanced across the table to Roan Fel. Shoulders hunched, head bent, lips tight in an angry futile sneer, looked like a master of nothing.

Though Imperial satellites in the Paqualis system relayed the battle's grim state, Alliance jamming had cut off Bastion's direct link to Admiral Kaylac. The watchers were surprised when the smaller star destroyers began peeling from their defensive positions and forced their way from the planet, from *Invincible*. The Alliance seemed content to let them flee; they knew their target, and they kept pounding it. Ten minutes after the first star destroyer escaped to hyperspace, *Invincible* was alone, and a minute after that, the fighting started fizzling to nothing.

The bleak silence of the war room was broken when a technician announced, weak-voiced, that the Alliance jamming had shut down, and they were detecting an all-

frequency transmission from *Invincible* announcing unconditional surrender.

There was other long, grim moment before Fel asked, "In whose name? Admiral Kaylac's?"

The tech frowned. "It seems to be... Captain Hurano, sir."

"*Invincible's* commanding officer," Director Seniac muttered.

"What happened to Kaylac?" Calixte asked.

"Uncertain, sir. But it seems that the supreme commander is... no longer in command."

He could be injured, dead, killed by a mutinied crew. It didn't matter. From what Calixte could see, *Invincible* had been battered and broken so badly any of those were possible.

"We're getting another transmission, from Champala," the tech added. "It's Admiral Veed. He wants to speak directly."

Fel sighed and straightened. "Put him on."

Calixte watched as Veed's miniature holo appeared in front of the emperor. In a very tired voice he said, "We've just received a surrender signal from *Invincible*. Is it authentic?"

"It is," rasped Fel.

"I see." Veed hesitated, looked down. Seeing him humbled wasn't as gratifying as Calixte had expected. "Sir, the Alliance had left only a light task force at Chamapala. I believe we can outfight them and take the planet."

"And can you hold it, Admiral? Against their First and Fifth Fleets?"

"We will do whatever you command, Emperor."

Fel snorted. "Retreat, Admiral. Tell Sha Dun that is my direct order. Fall back to Ord Lithonne. From there we'll take stock of this disaster and decide what to do from here."

Veed nodded, saluted, and killed the holo.

As soon as it was gone Seniac rose from his seat. "Your Majesty... It's clear this entire engagement was a trap. As your intelligence director I should have seen it and did not. Right now, you have my deepest apologies. In an hour, you'll have my formal letter of resignation."

Calixte expected Fel to say something- soothing, damning, *anything*- but he simply nodded. Seniac turned and walked out of the room without another word.

Calixte lingered long enough to hear that Veed and Sha Dun had withdrawn to Ord Lithone. After that she left the dwindling crowd in the war room and made her way out of the palace, down high elegant halls that had never seemed so haunted. On the way back to her apartment complex her mind was busy with possibilities, none of them good, and every thought just drove deeper what a fool she'd been, a vain and selfish fool whose personal ambition had doomed the Empire she'd yearned to protect all her life.

And when she stepped into her living room she saw Darth Maladi standing there calmly, profile to the window, face cast in warm morning light. It took all her effort not to scream.

"You show up now? *Now?*" Calixte stalked over to the woman, hands clasped to fists.

An invisible hand stopped her an arm's length away. Maladi stood still, arms crossed, with an expression either dispassionate or condescending. "I understand your consternation," the Sith said. "However, you can rest assured the situation is well in hand."

"Whose hand? The Empire has lost the war!"

"Calm yourself, Moff Calixte. It's not like you to be melodramatic."

She tried to be calm but all she could do was shove anger deep inside her and let it simmer. "We have just lost our greatest weapon. Our supreme commander is dead or captured, our intelligence chief just *quit*, and-" She stuttered, suddenly remembered what she'd been angry about *before* today's disaster. "What happened with Yaga Auchs? All these weeks I've been waiting for *something* from you, or something from Fel, but I got *nothing*."

"The situation on Mandalore is resolved," Maladi said simply.

"Resolved how?"

"In a way that benefits us both. Rest assured, Fel will find no cause to punish you. He believed Keelu's rouge agents were at work." The Sith with gave twisted smile. "How fortunate the good admiral is beyond his justice... or his inquiry."

Calixte felt suddenly dizzy. She braced one hand on the back of her sofa and said, "We've lost Kaylac, and Seniac, and *Invincible*... You can't tell me you're *satisfied* with this."

"We're not satisfied to lose *Invincible*, but the rest..." Maladi shrugged. "Consider. The Empire will need a new supreme commander now. And a new intelligence director. I know you've coveted Seniac's post, and Morlish Veed must be lusting for Kaylac's chair." That hadn't even occurred to Calixte. The possibility gave no comfort; she had no desire to captain a sinking ship. Maladi smiled that condescending smile and added, "That war isn't over yet. Don't assume that it is."

"It may not be over, but it is *lost*. The Alliance will press into our territory now. They'll take our systems. They'll force Fel to crawl to them on his knees and beg for mercy." Realization struck. She stared at Maladi. "Unless Fel is removed now, when his popularity is at its lowest."

"The Sith are not so obvious. No, it suits our purposes that Fel remain on the throne... for now." Still that damned smile. Calixte wanted to smack her.

"You Sith pushed the Empire into this war," Calixte said. "You *must* have a plan to win it."

"We do." Maladi's expression turned serious. "The time is coming when the Sith will reveal ourselves, to Fel and the Jedi both. When that time comes, we need the Moff Council to be united behind us. You've helped us overrule Fel before. You must do it again."

"If I'm to sell you to the Moff Council, you must have something *worth* selling. They'll want more than sulking conspirators, vague premonitions, and empty promises."

Maladi took the insult in stride. "They'll have it. The Alliance will not take any of your systems. That is *not* an empty promise."

"That remains to be seen. By what miracle are you going to do that? Or will you refuse to explain, *again*?"

Maladi looked thoughtful. "A *miracle*... Yes, that is an appropriate term. You see, you won't have to sell the Moff Council anything. They'll have already bought it."

"I am beyond sick of your games," Calixte snarled.

And suddenly she was lifted off her feet. An invisible hasp clasped her throat. Her feet kicked air, a choking sound escaped her throat, but no air passed. With desperation came fear unlike anything she'd ever known.

And just like that it was over. She was dropped to her feet and just barely managed to keep from pitching on the carpet. Touching her sore throat, Calixte glared at the Sith woman. "I will not forget that."

"Nor would I expect you to." Maladi had never uncrossed her arms. "We have walked a long path together, Moff Calixte, and we are getting near the end. If you hesitate now, you will be destroyed. That is not a threat, that is a statement of fact. If the emperor learns what you've done behind his back, he *will* kill you. Continue walking with us a little longer and you'll have all your ambitions realized. Frankly, I think the choice makes itself."

"What do you expect me to do now?" Calixte rasped.

"As I said, prepare the Moff Council. Make certain they'll back us."

"What if Fel sues for peace before you stage your 'miracle'?"

"He won't." Maladi smiled again, softer. "His pride is as great as anyone's. He'll look for ways out of this humiliation."

"He may go to the Jedi. I think... I think he'd been in contact with them."

"Good. We were counting on that."

Calixte blinked. "Why?"

"You'll learn in time."

"Is this about your 'miracle' for the Moff Council?"

"Not precisely." Maladi stepped for the door. With the black dress pooled at her feet she seemed to glide. "Patience, Moff Calixte."

"Where are you going?" Calixte tried to go after her, but her feet were planted on the carpet.

"I have another appointment," the Sith said. "We'll talk again soon. Good day."

Without even tapping the controls, Maladi caused the door to slid open. The Sith stepped into the hallway, not even looking to make sure it was clear, and closed the door behind her with the flick of a wrist.

Calixte could move again. She sagged and braced herself against the sofa back. Her mind groped frantically for a way out. Maladi was right about Fel; if he brought her the truth he'd only punish her. Her thought lifted to Kol. He was a Jedi, with a capacity for forgiveness that always amazed her. If there was true behind Maladi's vague promises then the Jedi were in danger once again; maybe Kol, maybe even Cade. But unlike before, she had no idea *what* danger. All she could do was contact Kol in secret and explain everything. It might not do any good. It would only expose her deepest secret to Darth Maladi, and Calixte had no doubt the Sith witch would kill her.

Slowly, bitterly, she accepted what Maladi had said as truth. They'd walked so far together; the only thing to do was walk a little further, and pray she came out alive.

After the disaster at Paqualis III, Roan Fel summoned his most senior Knights to his palace. When Eshkar Niin stepped inside the chamber, the emperor was already there. So was the empress, as well as her younger brother. Hogrum Chalk had trained as an Imperial Knight, just like Elliah, but a near-fatal accident a decade ago had damaged his body so badly he was as much machine as man now. A red light blazed in place of one eye and his visible face was streaked with pale scars. Despite his fearsome appearance, Niin knew that Hogrum was as loyal to the emperor as anyone- and especially devoted to his sister.

"Thank you for coming, Master Niin," Fel said. His voice was tired, but Niin could feel anger smoldering beneath it. "I'm sure you've heard about the battle by now."

"I have." Niin said. Fel's eyes lingered on his, sparking anxiety. Upon coming back to Bastion he'd been afraid Fel would see through his claims about Mandalore. It hadn't happened yet, but it could. Just by keeping the secret to

himself, Niin had betrayed his oath as an Imperial Knight, and he knew Fel would not hold back punishment.

Then the emperor looked away. Fel had too much else on his mind. Niin felt relieved, but also disappointed. For all his decades as a Knight, he'd looked up his Emperor as the embodiment of what a Force-user should be, wise and powerful and certainly impossible to fool.

Yet he'd failed to see through Niin's lies. The Sith, if their word was true, had manipulated him as well. As Niin looked at him now he saw Roan Fel was a smaller, weaker man than he'd ever realized.

"Some things are becoming clearer," Hogrum put in. "The Alliance reports that Admiral Kaylac was killed during the attack on *Invincible*. Admiral Keelu apparently escaped her flagship before its destruction, but her pod was captured by the Alliance."

Niin was glad, but kept it from the others. After he'd passed the Sith's lie to his Emperor, Fel had promised to sit down with Keelu and get the truth from her once the battle at Paqualis III was over. That was no longer an option, and the lie was therefore safe. Niin was safe. It was almost like the Force *wanted* him to be safe.

That was dangerous thinking. He cut off the thought before it went far. "Have you accepted Director Seniac's resignation?"

Fel nodded soberly. "He recommended Nyna Calixte as his replacement. I realize your report from Mandalore clears her of involvement *there*, but I do not trust her."

"Who will replace Kaylac as supreme commander?"

"I am leaning toward Morlish Veed," Fel said, then raised a brow, as though expected objection.

Niin considered the choice. Putting Veed in charge of the entire Imperial military was a signal this war would not end soon. It would tell the Empire's people that, and the Alliance's admirals. It would also force the Empire's ultimate hawk to own the war he'd pressed for. If things got even worse, weight of those failures would fall heavily on Veed and it would be easy for Fel to sack and humiliate him.

A comforting thought, except if Veed went down, the Empire would go down with him.

“For the moment, we will reinforce our forward lines,” Fel told them. “If the Alliance tries to press forward, we will make them earn every scrap of our territory.”

“I understand, Majesty.”

“Do you?” Fel crossed his arms. “Tell me, Master Niin, you have studies strategy. What would *you* do with the fleets, in my place?”

Niin hesitated. The rational choice, the one that would save Imperial systems and Imperial lives, would be to call a ceasefire and open negotiations with the Alliance. Yet it would be a supreme humiliation, one Niin balked from and Fel clearly resisted.

“If we are to continue battling the Alliance,” Niin said carefully, “The Imperial Knights are a powerful resource. Our potential has been... under-utilized thus far.”

Fel’s smile was brittle. “You want to battle Jedi on the front lines, then?”

He’d wanted it from the start. Everyone in this room knew it. “I’d take no joy in it, Majesty. But this war against the Alliance was always a long shot. We can’t afford to waste *any* resource. Especially not the Force.”

Fel turned away. Niin glanced at the empress, who returned the stare with a frown in her eyes and said nothing.

“I will consider this option,” Fel said eventually. “But making this a conflict between Force-users will do nothing to stop the war. It will only expand it.”

Niin nodded, though he didn’t believe it. If they existed in the numbers Darth Vorkan had implied, the Sith would be an even greater front-line asset than the Imperial Knights. They had access to ferocious power no Jedi or Knights could reach. He’d felt that first-hand.

But because he could never suggest that, Niin said, “We still have a powerful fleet. I suggest reinforcing the existing lines. And if possible, stall for time while we shore up resources. Send out peace feelers to the Alliance, just to distract them. When the attack *does* come, we can fight them to a standstill.”

“And then?”

Niin swallowed. “End this war with our original territory intact.”

It was not much to show for a war, but barring full-scale intervention by the Imperial Knights- or the Sith- Niin saw no other future for the Empire.

Elliah sighed and said, “One good thing to come from this is Admiral Keelu’s gone. It will be easier to settle things on *our* terms, not hers.”

“Indeed,” Fel said, like that was small relief. “I would have liked to hear her account of the situation on Mandalore... But we may learn the full story yet.”

“Majesty?” Niin’s heart beat hard.

“A small thing, Master Niin, and it may not be connected. But I think it’s worth your investigation.” Fel reached into his violet robes and withdrew a simple data-chip. “While you were off on Mandalore, a planet called Soulex in the Oplovix Sector was attacked. A settlement, inhabited by a secretive sect of Force-users called Jensaarai, was vaporized from orbit. This chip contains the sensor readings from a ship in the area that witnessed the attack. The assailants used a *Velox*-class frigate.”

Relieved and confused, Niin took the chip. “The Oplovix Sector is contested space, but I’ve never heard of Soulex.”

“A very minor world. It hasn’t seen fighting in this war until now- if that’s what this attack was.”

“I’m afraid I’m missing something.” Niin glanced at Hogrum and Elliah.

“It’s possible this attack was launched by Keelu or her subordinates,” the empress said.

“Ah. They want to kill Jedi but can’t get to them, so they find *other* Force-users to pummel.”

“Perhaps. Or it may be something else,” said Fel. “There are still *Velox*-class frigates in Imperial service, but many have been sold off. Master Niin, please use your investigative skills. Try to identify that frigate. If we can, we may have a clue to who massacred the Jensaarai.”

It was, he decided, something very much like what the Sith would do. “I will look into it, Majesty.”

“Good. Even if Keelu is gone, her associates may still act behind our backs and sabotage negotiations with the Alliance. This seems like a minor thing, Master Niin, but it may be critical.”

“Of course.” Niin made a fist around the chip. “I was just thinking this seemed like a job for Master Sinde.”

“He is away from Bastion for the time being.”

“When will he be back?”

“When he returns,” Fel said, ending the inquiry.

It wasn’t the first time Treis Sinde had disappeared without warning, presumably on missions so secret only the emperor knew about them. Sending his childhood friend on private jobs was Fel’s prerogative, and Niin had only wondered idly about them before. Now, he was more curious.

He left the Emperor’s chamber without saying anything more. He’d learned long ago how to shield his thoughts from fellow Knights, and he was apparently so good at it even the emperor couldn’t see through his obfuscations and lies. It gave Niin a swell of pride, and a subsequent flush of shame.

He pondered these strange feelings within him, as well as the chip in his hand. When he left the palace he went to the nearby academy where the Empire’s Knights both trained and, when not sent elsewhere, ate and slept. He could have passed this investigative duty to his apprentice, but the Emperor seemed insistent that Niin handle it personally, and Draco would be bored with it besides.

Niin spent the afternoon examining the data. The attacking frigate’s specifications were different from factory-standard, which meant this was probably one of the ships the Empire had sold off to third parties. That hardly made searching easier, and as the sun started to set he felt so oppressed by the impossibility and apparent pointlessness of the task that he wandered from the academy’s computer center and made his way to one of the wide empty balconies that looked out on Ravelin’s spires. The administrative center of the Empire was no Galactic City, but it was still a majestic, dignified place. He loved the city like he loved his Empire; the thought of both being humiliated by some arm-twisting treaty with the Alliance sickened him. He was sickened, too, by the

memory of the emperor as he'd just seen him: a bent, tired man trying desperately to salvage a situation that he'd never been powerful enough to control.

Niin pondered these things alone in the dusk-cool air until he felt a nearby presence in the Force. Strange; he hadn't heard the doors to the balcony open. He pivoted, looked to his left, and saw a red-faced humanoid woman in a sleeveless black dress, her silky black hair pulled into a topknot.

He realized what she was, reached for his lightsaber, but did not ignite it. She was on the opposite end of the balcony and moved no closer, but when she spoke it was like she stood right beside him.

"Darth Vorkan said you had promise," the woman said. "I hope his judgement was sound."

He didn't loosen grip on his lightsaber. "How did you find me? How did you get here?"

"Does that really matter?"

Very still, he said, "I suppose it does not."

"My name is Darth Maladi and you are Eshkar Niin. I'm pleased to see that you did not break your promised to Darth Vorkan."

"I promised him nothing."

"Still, you have not revealed him to your emperor. Why is that, Master Niin?" She took a few steps closer.

"I am an Imperial Knight. I swore to protect the Empire and I will not break that vow."

"And your emperor, Roan Fel? Did you not swear a vow to him?"

"I will not harm him."

"And we are not asking you too." Maladi slinked a little closer. "Tell me, do you think Roan Fel is protecting the Empire now?"

His fingers twitched around his saber. "The emperor *is* the Empire."

"The throne, of course. But the man? He failed to see your small deception just as he failed to see our larger one. Now he is losing the war. The Empire will be beaten and humiliated before this is over. You must realize that. Don't you think Roan Fel bears some of the blame?"

"I will *not* harm him," Niin repeated. "And I will not put a *Sith* on the throne."

"And again, we're not asking you to," Maladi said patiently. "All we are asking, Knight, is that you help save the Empire."

"Your people forced the Empire into this war in the first place," Niin snarled.

"Yes, because we had a plan to win it." Maladi crossed her arms. "We can save the Empire, Master Niin. And you can play your part in that. Don't you *want* to save the Empire?"

"I won't not join your Sith either."

"Yet again, I'm not asking for that. I only want your *help*."

He felt backed into a corner, just like on Mandalore. Just hours ago he'd wondered what a legion of Sith warriors might do against the Jedi. Now, standing in front of one, he was repulsed, yet also curious.

"What kind of help?" he asked.

"Information, primarily. Details of Alliance fleet movements. Deployment of their key personnel. And their Jedi."

"Vorkan said you already had agents on Bastion."

"Yes, but none as close to the Emperor as *you*." Her voice dropped to a purr. She inched closer. "Show us where we can hurt the Alliance, hurt the Jedi. Then we will show *you* what the Sith can do in the Empire's service."

His free hands twitched with the memory of the datacard Fel had placed there. Maladi tilted her head, curious. "All we need is a small thing," she said. "That will be enough to bind us together."

"Did the Sith destroy a Jensaarai settlement on Soulex?" He asked, more than anything, because he wanted to know.

After the tiniest pause, Maladi said, "Yes. We did."

"Why?"

"The Jensaarai were powerful Force-users. They were allies to the Jedi, but were more willing to draw on the Force's raw strength, which the Jedi shun as the dark side. We were eliminating a possible threat, quietly. You see the wisdom in that, don't you?"

Niin did, but he said, "You weren't so quiet. The emperor found out. He even procured a recording of it. He's assigned me to track the old frigate you used. He thinks Admiral Keelu was involved."

"Interesting." Maladi's expression went thoughtful. "And where did he get this recording from?"

"I'm not sure," Niin admitted.

"One of your Imperial Knights?"

"Perhaps." He thought on Treis Sinde, missing during a crisis.

"Or does Fel have links with the Jedi?"

"I don't know."

"Truly?" Her red-gold eyes stared into him.

"Yes, truly," Niin hissed. "I don't know. I've... suspected he had some contact with Kol Skywalker. They *are* relatives, even if they were never close. I don't think it's direct contact. They probably use messengers."

"Well, that's very interesting." Maladi tapped her lower lip. "Perhaps we should do a test."

"What kind of test?"

"You said Fel gave you the task of investigating the Soullex attack. He wants you to find the owners of the frigate, yes?"

"That's right."

"Then you should find convincing evidence that the frigate was purchased from the Empire a decade ago and bought by the Sanrex Corporation. It exists. You'll find it in the Alliance's corporate registry, and it really did purchase that ship a decade ago. It's a front we've been operating on the planet Mustafar."

He was vaguely familiar with the world. It was young and unstable, but mining corporations sometimes braved its lava-covered landscape. "Mustafar is on the opposite side of the galaxy from Soullex. It's as far from Imperial territory as can be."

"Exactly. If Fel is in contact with the Jedi, then he'll pass your message to them, and *they* will investigate Mustafar. And if a few Imperial Knights are sent instead, we'll know he doesn't have Jedi friends."

"If Fel does send Imperial Knights to Mustafar.... You must not harm them. If they're hurt in any way, I will go to Fel with everything I know." He tried to sound resolute, but he was aware how little he really knew about these Sith, and how unforgiving his emperor would be.

Maladi tapped her lip again. "I would give you my word, but I imagine a Sith's promise isn't worth much to you."

"I want to save the Empire." That, at least, he firmly believed. "Show me you can do that, and I'll go along with you. But I will not hurt the emperor or the empress."

"You're the second person today who's asked for a demonstration of our power." Her smile was faintly amused. "You will get it soon, as long as you pass one more lie to Roan Fel. Will you do that for us, Eshkar Niin?"

One more lie; she said it like it was a small thing, but it wasn't. It was a second, longer step into the unknown. Yet he'd already made the first, and deep down, despite his doubts and nagging guilt, he didn't think that choice had been wrong.

"I will," he said. "But after that, I expect to be repaid for what I've done."

"Don't worry," Darth Maladi said. "I believe ours can be a very fruitful partnership."

Chapter Seventeen

Two mis-matched ships, joined airlock to airlock, twisted lazily through space. They were back in Nat's hold, but this time they skipped the Johrian brandy. Leaning forward, elbows on the scarred dejarik table, Treis Sinde said, "The frigate that attacked Soullux wasn't ours. We've gotten an identification on the vessel, reasonably reliable. It was sold off to a private buyer a decade ago."

Nat Skywalker leaned back in his cushion, cautious. He sensed no duplicity from Treis and never had, but he wasn't ready to trust the man Treis worked for. The Jedi had been badly burned by him once.

"Does this buyer have a name?" he asked.

"It's called the Sanrex Corporation. It's a small business operating out of Mustafar."

That gave Nat a spike of dread, but he wasn't sure if it came from the Force or his weak nerves. The Skywalkers did not have good history on Mustafar.

"What kind of business is it?"

"I'm not sure. It wasn't in any of the records. The emperor suspects that it may have been purchased from Sanrex by another party, affiliated with Keelu. We've learned she was involved with buying out the Mandalorians and putting Yaga Auch's in power."

"I've heard that to," Nat allowed. Marin had given him a summary of her less-than-voluntary excursion to Mandalore.

"Needless to say, there's only one way to find out."

"I don't suppose you're volunteering."

Treis shook his head. "You know the state of the war. Fel wants every able-bodied Knight available."

"Do you think he's going to start using you on the front lines?"

Treis shrugged weakly. Nat sensed the man didn't want that role, but the Empire was getting desperate, and that meant the war was going to turn uglier.

"This was never our business," Treis added. "*You* came to us about Soulex, remember?"

Nat nodded. He'd told them about Soulex, but not everything. Not about the residual anger and dark side energy his mother had sensed in the burnt crater. Nat's mother and brother had both agreed to keep that quiet. Nat was tempted to disobey them, just to see what Treis' reaction would be. Together, a long time ago, they'd killed a Sith. There weren't many in either of their orders who could claim that.

But in the end he resisted temptation. Jade and Kol had made that decision and Nat Skywalker was just the older son, the lesser brother. "Mustafar," he said. "We'll look into it. Thanks for bringing that to us."

"I figure it's the least I could do. Hopefully you can tell me how it all turned out one day."

"Hopefully," Nat echoed. "You know, this war doesn't have to keep going. It could end tomorrow, easily."

"I know it. And so does he. But it's not that simple."

"You should still tell him. To make sure he knows."

"He does." Treis pushed up from the table. Nat stood too. The Imperial Knight extended a hand over the dejarik board. "Until next time."

"Until next time." Nat shook. He hoped next time would take place somewhere besides a clandestine meeting in blackest place. He didn't expect it, but still, he hoped.

There was no denying the post-battle high running through the Alliance fleet. Kol didn't need the Force to tell him that, though energy and optimism reverberated from every crewman on *Krakana*. What truly drove the point home was that when he moved through the cruiser's corridors, no one

avoided his eyes. Many in the Alliance still looked at the Jedi as the cause of this war, but now victory had washed even blame away.

Kol wasn't sure how long it would last, but for now he allowed himself to share in that energy and optimism.

He felt some of it from Admiral Lekhwash too, but he could also feel the Quarren carefully reining in his emotions. When he and Kol met to discuss the next stage of the war, Lekhwash studied the holographic starfield map with the same intense scrutiny as always.

"One thing is certain," he said. "We cannot wait too long before beginning our offensive."

"It looks like the Imperials are shoring up their forward bases," Kol observed.

"Indeed. And the more time we give them, the better defended they'll be when time comes to attack." Lekhwash tapped at one holo-marker. "I've instructed Admiral Slossar to pull his ships back from Botajef. That was never more than a feint anyway."

"Will you use them somewhere else?"

"Indeed." Lekhwash pointed at another light. "Ord Lithone. That will be our next battleground. It's currently defended by the ships we pounded at Champala. They'll be weakened. Demoralized."

"They'll also be able to get backup from Bilbringi and Corsin."

"And we'll be able to attack with the First and Fifth, plus portions of our other fleets. We'll place interdictors on major hyperspace routes leading to Ord Lithone. Once we take Ord Lithone, we'll cut their supply lines between their two remaining forward bases. From there we can push forward, deeper into Imperial space, and split their main battle groups."

"A good strategy," Kol muttered.

"If it works, you mean." A few of Lekhwash's mouth-tentacles curled. "I don't expect it to be easy. We're moving into *their* systems now, and they'll fight hard for them. But ultimately this is the only way forward, unless Emperor Fel starts begging for peace."

"Has there been any hint of that?"

"His diplomats have contacted ours, requesting preliminary talks. He's probably stalling for time."

"Does the triumvirate see it like that?"

"They do, actually, and they've authorized me to begin the offensive at my discretion." When Kol said nothing he added, "Don't look disappointed, Master Jedi. Were you really expecting Fel to surrender?"

"No," Kol said, but he'd been hoping. He'd thought removing Admiral Keelu from the picture might embolden Fel to end the war, but that clearly wasn't the case. He'd never known his cousin well, but it was clear he understood the man even less than he'd thought.

"It will be a fierce fight," Lekhwash said. "There will be more battles, and many more deaths. But the Imperials asked for this war. They've brought this on themselves."

It was a way of viewing the war that many did not share. Even Kol didn't really agree, much as it would have lifted the burden of guilt from his shoulders. But he felt honest conviction coming from Lekhwash and was glad for it.

"The Jedi will do everything we can to help, just as before," Kol said. And if they ended this war, perhaps they could even go back to being Jedi again.

It had been months since he'd appeared before Darth Krayt in person, and the Nagai once called Relik K'sharn had almost forgotten the dread and awe he compelled. Dropping one knee to the cold Korriban flagstones, he bowed his head but looked up at the throne. The rough surface and vicious spikes of Krayt's Yuuzhan Vong armor made him look like some nightmare monster from legend, and the disjointed fire-red and ice-blue of his eyes made them all the more disconcerting as they blazed into the bowing Nagai.

"Darth Vorkan says your training had been proceeding well" Krayt began.

"I am glad to hear it." His eyes darted to the black-and-gold Blood Carver standing on Krayt's right, then back to the Dark Lord. "To what do I owe the honor of this summoning?"

Instead of answering, Krayt returned a question. "What is it you crave?"

"I desire... many things."

"But what most of all?"

It was a test, but of what he wasn't sure. When he'd been summoned by the Dark Lord he'd been given no reason, but his first and strongest hope was that, finally, he was going to be sent to his final trial and earn himself a name.

It was a direct, specific, attainable hope, but he didn't know if that was what Krayt asked for. The Dark Lord could be asking for a desire more lofty or more nebulous. Yet he knew, also, that Krayt was grooming him to be a warleader, and any such being had be concerned with hard, practical realities or marshaling armies and mounting campaigns.

"My Lord," he said, "I wish to pass my trial. I wish to become a Sith Lord and earn myself a name."

"That is good," Krayt rumbled. "To your feet."

He rose, straightened, and looked to Krayt and Vorkan. "Has my time come?"

"It was come." Krayt's red-and-blue eyes shifted to Vorkan. "Explain to your apprentice what his test will be."

"It is simple," said Vorkan. "You will turn this war in our favor."

He didn't know how to respond. The war was going badly; after Paqualis III he wasn't sure how to recover it. If Krayt and Vorkan were asking him to come up with some genius strategy to tip the scales of the war, he might as well kill himself now rather than face the result of his failure.

"It is not so difficult as you might believe." The Blood Carver sounded amused. "History rises and falls with the lives of a few. Where would the galaxy be without Darth Sidious or the Skywalkers? Even Force-blind vermin like Davek Fel can make history. If we had removed him forty years ago, today would be very different."

"Am I to kill Roan Fel?" Slaying the emperor and his Force-trained Knights would be worth a Sith Lord's name.

But Vorkan shook his head. "Fel still serves a purpose. Your target is on the other side of this war."

"Kol Skywalker, then?"

"Patience." Krayt sounded amused. "That, too, will come in time. You are to kill the architect of the Alliance war effort, their Supreme Commander Lekhwash. He is a brave, talented officer, and he has become a symbol to the Alliance's soldiers. He must be killed, painfully and publicly. It will crush their spirit, and their campaign will falter."

The Nagai's first feeling was disappointment. Lekhwash was mere vermin; an important and capable vermin to be sure, but no Force-user. Then his mind adjusted to what that task would entail. Killing one Force-blind Quarren would be easy. *Getting* to him aboard his armed, armored, and well-secured flagship would be the challenge.

Escaping with his life afterward would a greater one still. He had no desire to martyr himself for the Sith cause. He had entered Darth Krayt's service on the promise he could unlock great powers within himself. They'd be no use to him dead.

"Remember whom you serve," Krayt admonished. "The design of the One Sith supersedes everything, even your own life."

He cursed himself for thinking he could hide his ambition from the Dark Lord. "I do not wish to die before attaining mastery."

"That will be in your hands. *Entirely*. You will accomplish this task, or fail, alone."

"I see." He let his eyes slip to Vorkan.

"I thought you'd be eager to accomplish this yourself," the Blood Carver said. "I've trained you as well as I can. Go and complete your trial. You will be a true Sith Lord after that, and you will take on a name of your choosing. I will be elsewhere, completing other tasks."

"Darth Vorkan will be going to Mustafar," Krayt supplied. "He has an important meeting with the Jedi to keep."

"Jedi? Then we will reveal ourselves to them at last?"

"Did I not tell you to murder Lekhwash in public view?"

"Of course." The full ramification hadn't occurred to him. He realized the honor he was being given, and it only sharpened his desire to succeed.

He dropped to one knee in a full bow. "It will be done, My Lord."

And once it was, everything would change- for the Nagai who'd been a warlord, for the Jedi and Sith, for the galaxy.

Jade Skywalker had never been to Mustafar, but it was a name that conjured nightmares. Her grandfather had described it to her as the hell in which his own father had been baptized, ravaged, and remade as a Sith Lord. The planet's surface alternated glowing rivers and scarlet seas of lava with obsidian peaks and ridges pushed skyward by unsteady tectonic plates. Despite having barely any breathable oxygen, the planet had native sentients who even now mined precious minerals from beneath the churning crust and sold them to offworld corporations.

From orbit it looked like a marble of reds and black swirls. Jade sat in the co-pilot's seat of Nat's freighter as it slowly circled the planet. The tension she felt from her son matched her own, but when she glanced back at the others in the cockpit, she felt nothing at all. Khat Lah, Besh Lah, and Vua Yaght were as invisible as always. She'd never liked the Yuuzhan Vong being absent from the Force, and for the first time she found it almost comforting.

Their total void was preferable to the dark powers she was afraid to find on Mustafar.

They'd been circling the planet for the last half-hour, patiently waiting. They'd sent no hails and received none. Tense silence reigned in the cockpit until finally something lit on Nat's scanners and he said, "The rest of the party's here."

Jade looked at the space surrounding Mustafar but made out nothing. The second half of the Jedi team was arriving in an ovular *Crix-class* courier shuttle. The ship itself and most of the crew were on loan from the Galactic Alliance financial security department. Jade wasn't entirely sure how Kol had managed to get one for Jedi business, but apparently her son had succeeded in making some high-place friends.

"Open the comms," Nat told his mother. "Let's see what they have to say."

Jade's hands moved across the controls, turning on the cockpit's speakers and patching into the courier shuttle's

comm system on a pre-arranged frequency. Nat's freighter would transmit nothing, but it would receive a relay of the shuttle's communications, inbound and outbound, thus letting the Jedi listen in without revealing themselves as aligned with the new arrivals.

As soon as Jade tapped on the speakers, a familiar female voice filled the cockpit. "This is the Galactic Alliance shuttle *ROB-156* hailing Sanrex Incorporated Headquarters. Please respond."

The voice belonged to Ceynar Valiss, a Jedi Master about Jade's age. She and two Knights were dressed up as Alliance auditors on an official inquiry. Jade, Nat, and Valiss had agreed before coming here that there was no guarantee Sanrex had anything to do with the attack on Soulex. They'd purchased that *Velox*-class frigate from the Empire a decade ago and could have sold it to another party since, and gut feelings notwithstanding, there was no reason to assume their guilt.

So they'd come at Sanrex Incorporated two ways. The company's listing in the Alliance's central business registry included the exact location of their headquarters on Mustafar's surface, and it was to that location that Valiss directed her hail now.

There was a long enough pause for Jade to wonder whether Sanrex still occupied the place. Then a voice- male, with an accent she couldn't place- said, "This is Sanrex. State your business."

"My name is Amanth Holar of the Revenue Oversight Bureau," Valiss replied. "I have been authorized to initiate a preliminary investigation into Sanrex Incorporated's financial solvency."

"A *tax audit*?" The voice sounded genuinely confused. "Why weren't we notified before this?"

"A new clause to the Bureau charter allows us to procede with a level two audit after informing the investigated business thirty minutes before the process begins," Valiss said, crisp and professionally demeaning. "Subsection Besh of Oversight Amendment Fourteen, specifically. Consider yourself informed."

"We... we are not prepared for an audit. We need time to gather our records, contact our legal representatives..."

"This is a level *two* audit. Which means it's a cursory review. We only need to interview the company's chief or deputy financial officer."

"Yet Coruscant sends somebody all the way out here..." The voice dripped suspicion.

"We are actually operating out of the sector headquarters on Arkanis. Please light a landing beacon and we will be at your factory in twenty-eight minutes."

"Wait. We need, ah, I don't have authorization to..."

"Failure to comply with an investigation team from the Revenue Oversight Bureau will incur a fine and possible legal penalty," Valiss sniffed. "As I'm sure your financial officers are aware."

A labored sigh crackled through the speakers. "We, ah... we understand. We'll mark a place for you to land."

"I look forward to speaking with your representatives. Good day."

The connection clicked off, leaving the freighter cockpit in silence again. Nat checked his scanners and announced, "They're holding position, still. No beacon from the ground yet. They'll stall until the last minute, I'll bet."

"The speaker's anxiety sounded... authentic," Khat Lah said.

"It did, but that could mean anything," Jade said. "Anyway, so far so good. Ceynar and her team are doing their part, which means it's time we do ours."

"Twenty-seven minutes, or thereabouts." Nat began flipping switches on his control panel and the freighter's aft engines rumbled to life. "Enough time to circle halfway around the planet, drop to low altitude, backtrack to the Sanrex facility, and put down."

"Just barely enough," Jade added.

Nat gripped the throttle. "I can make it work."

The bravado in her son's voice made Jade smile. It had been a long time since Nat projected that kind of confidence, but in the Force she could feel it was forced. This damned planet was a bad omen.

As Nat pushed the freighter ahead and began curving toward Mustafar's thin atmospheric envelope, she reached out with the Force to touch Valiss. The woman's familiar mind touched hers back, sending encouragement. So far so good, Valiss told her.

True enough, thought Jade, but they had a long way to go.

With six minutes and twenty seconds to spare, Nat Skywalker set his freighter down amidst the columns of layered obsidian rock that jutted out from a mountain slope near the Sanrex Incorporated headquarters. For the last hundred kilometers, Nat had piloted his freighter dangerously low over churning seas of lava, sometimes jerking over molten spouts, and followed it up with a stomach-churning wind through a sprawling black-rock mountain range, all to stay clear of the Sanrex facility's sensors. The flight had seemed much longer than it actually was, and when the freighter settled down on its landing gear Nat allowed a big sigh of relief.

"Your piloting was excellent," Besh Lah told him.

Nat gave the Yuuzhan Vong a curt nod. "Thanks, but we've still got to move. How long until Valiss sets down?"

His mother checked the active scanners. "She's dropping into the atmosphere now. Sanrex finally lit a beacon."

"Well, let's go see what we're up against. Khat Lah, Besh Lah, you're with me. Let's get the breathing gear and head out."

As he rose from his seat Nat looked down at his mother. "Valiss' comm is linked to her ship, and the shuttle will bounce it to us. We should be able to hear everything she does."

"I know," Jade said. "I can feel her in the Force too. I'll keep us connected."

Nat nodded and looked back up. Khat Lah and Besh Lah had left the cockpit, and Vua Yaght watched him expectantly. Nat knew what he wanted to say to the Yuuzhan Vong: *Take care of my mother*. Jade wouldn't appreciate being babied, so instead he said, "Stay with the ship. If you have any problems at all, call us."

Vua Yaght simply nodded, stoic warrior to the last. Nat stepped past him and into the freighter's hold. His communications headset and breathing mask lay on the scarred dejarik table, while the two Yuuzhan Vong had already affixed the gnullith air filters over their faces.

Before putting his mask on, Nat said, "You'll follow my lead. We move fast, stay down, and stay out of sight. We're there to watch and observe. My mother will stay here and do the listening."

"We understand," Khat Lah said. He threw some animal-skin cape over his shoulders, then moved over to a meter-long wood case the warriors had brought aboard. When they opened the lid and Nat saw what was inside, he balked.

"There's no need to bring amphistaffs and thud bugs. This is a recon mission, nothing else."

"I was told *Jeedai* are prepared for anything," said Khat Lah as he lifted one snake-like weapon out. "So are we."

With a snap of the wrist the amphistaff straightened. With another, it curled itself around Khat Lah's waist like a belt. Besh Lah did the same, then armed himself with a bandolier of thud bugs. It was, in Nat's view, overkill, but before stepping out of the ship he grabbed a blaster pistol from the weapons locker and attached it to his belt, right beside the lightsaber.

Even with the breathing mask covering his mouth and nostrils, Mustafar reeked. The sulfur and brimstone made Nat's face twist, and the heat was so oppressive his face ran with sweat before he'd left view of the freighter. Still, time was short, so he ducked low and moved quickly. To his mild chagrin the Yuuzhan Vong took lead and moved faster through the black stone crags, cutting the most direct path to the edge of the jutting plateau on which they'd landed. They didn't have the Force to draw for strength, but they were younger and stronger than Nat, and apparently that was more than compensation.

When Nat caught up to the two warriors they'd dropped onto their bellies and crawled to the edge of a broad ledge. Beyond that ledge was a steep drop into a churning lake of fire, roughly ovoid in shape and perhaps three kilometers

long at its widest point. About one kilometer down the lava-lapped shoreline was the metal face of what looked like a manufacturing facility. A few tall stacks puffed smoke to join Mustafar's natural fumes, and giant metal vanes, tens of meters tall, jutted out over the lake from horizontal pylons. Sometimes lava churned upward and slapped against shimmering energy shields protecting the factory's base.

Right on cue, the ovular Alliance shuttle fell out of churning black clouds and decelerated. Nat brought out his macrobinoculars and traced its patch to the small circular landing pad extending from the factory's upper levels. It was just one pad, and there were no other ships there. Nat scanned the rest of the exterior and spotted a few ports that could have been gated hangar mouths, but he wasn't positive.

He turned his attention back to the landing pad. From his angle the shuttle's cooling thrusters occluded half the pad, but he made out a handful of beings standing outside to greet the supposed Alliance audit team. They looked human, or at least humanoid. Thin bodies, professional suits, no visible weapons. It was likely Sanrex Incorporated was just a stepping stone to their Jensaarai-killers, not an enemy at all. That should have relieved Nat, but it didn't. It was hard to feel relieved when he was on this storied, cursed hell of a world.

He couldn't see Master Valiss and her two knights, all dressed as Alliance tax officials, come down the shuttle ramp. The Sanrex greeters lingered in view though, talking and gesturing to people unseen. Finally, the Sanrex agents turned and walked toward the factory entrance. Nat caught sight of a short-haired older woman, a young man, and a hairy Tammarian as all three Jedi followed their hosts into the factory.

"They're inside now," Nat whispered.

"We understand." Khat Lah lay on his stomach beside Nat, squinting at the factory like he could see all the Jedi had. Maybe he could; the Yuuzhan Vong probably bred their warrior caste for great eyesight.

Nat looked through his binoculars again. The shuttle's Alliance crew was still inside. Six of them, he recalled. He

waited to see if any Sanrex crew or droids started poking around the docked ship, but nothing happened. The pad was empty and still.

Nat sighed. So far, so good, and he didn't like it. The Yuuzhan Vong stared at him; his agitation was plain and he tried to distract them from it. "I'll patch in and see what they're talking about," he said.

He tapped his earpiece once. That should have linked him directly to the freighter's comm systems, which in turn would be synced to the Alliance shuttle and thus whatever concealed comlink Master Valiss had taken with her inside the factory. All he got was static.

Finally something had gone wrong. He was almost glad. Nat changed the earpiece's frequency and tried hailing the freighter directly. Still no good.

"What is wrong?" asked Besh Lah.

"I can't make contact with the ship. Theirs *or* ours. They must have put up a broad jamming field."

"Can the planet itself be the cause?"

Nat was about to remind Besh Lah that only Zonama Sekot had a mystic governing will. Then he realized the warrior had been referring to the ash, lava, and choking smoke that belched out of the molten lake. "I don't think so," he said. "It *shouldn't*."

"Perhaps something is wrong with our freighter," said Khat Lah, voice tense.

Nat reached out to his mother in the Force. She was anxious and alert. And, he sensed, getting closer.

He pushed off from the ground, rose to a crouch, and had just started back toward the ship when Jade appeared. She'd strapped on a breathing mask of her own and her face was shining with sweat. It pinned white hair-wisps to her forehead and fell in darkening drops onto her pale Jedi tunic.

The first thing Nat told his mother was, "You didn't have to come out here."

"The comm systems are all down," she panted. Jade dropped into a crouch and inched closer to the Yuuzhan Vong at the ledge. "They must have a jamming field. That's not something they'd keep up all the time.

"But what did you come out *here*?"

"I just wanted to get closer. To *feel* closer." Jade narrowed her eyes, stared at the distant factory. "Besides, Vua Yaght's watching the ship."

Nat crouched beside his mother. "Can you still feel Valiss?"

"I do. And I don't think she knows anything's wrong."

"So she's not panicked? Not in danger?"

Jade closed her eyes, reached deeper into herself to touch the other Jedi. "No. She's alert. A little tense. But I don't think anything's gone wrong for her."

Not yet, Nat thought sourly. Master Valiss and her two knights were supposed to scout the facility, subtly probe as to that *Velox*-class frigate's whereabouts, and use the Force to detect subterfuge from the Sanrex people. Nat, Jade, and the warriors were here as backup, and to spot irregularities. Nat had wanted to go inside himself, but Jade had pointed out that if there really *were* dark side users behind Sanrex, they'd likely recognize a Skywalker.

"Can you tell Valiss her comm signal isn't reaching?" Nat asked.

Jade frowned. "I don't want to distract her from what she's doing. And there's nothing she can do to bring down that jamming field either."

Nat felt like they'd reached an impasse. Khat Lah offered optimism. "If everything else is going to plan, we should hold position," he said.

"I agree," said Jade. "For now, let's wait it out."

Nat nodded reluctantly. As Jade set down on her stomach between the Yuuzhan Vong, Nat dropped down too. He tried to calm his nerves and reach out with the Force. He could dimly feel the Alliance crew in their shuttle, and the Jedi inside the factory a little more strongly. He could feel other life-forms inside the factory too, but he had no guess as to their number. He sensed many minds at work, and beneath that business there was something else, something like anxiety or distraction.

Then everything changed. Pain flashed through his mind suddenly and was gone. His mother gasped.

"I don't feel her," Jade breathed. "She's gone. All three of them."

"Dead?" asked Khat Lah.

"I'm sure. Dead, unconscious—"

"We have to get out of here." Nat rose to his feet.

The others did too, but they barely got away from the ledge when a great roaring sound filled the air. Nat drew and ignited his lightsaber, as did Jade.

Then the earth shook. The boom of an explosion popped Nat's ears and the pressure wave knocked him off his feet. For a moment the whole world turned silent. Black smoke swirled through the air and he realized the blast had come from the direction of the freighter.

Then, still soundless, he saw a trio of starfighters with broad angular wings jutting forward like daggers. Their thrust engines glowed blue trails as they arced above Nat's head and dove for the factory. They came at it from the side, and each one released a burst of laserfire that speared into the Alliance shuttle. Even as explosions tore it wide open it tumbled from its perch, and most of its flaming wreckage plunged into the churning lava below.

Faint sounds started coming back: the howl of wind, the roar of fighter-engines. Nat struggled to his feet. The warriors were already standing and Khat Lah was pulling Jade upright.

Beyond them, Nat watched the fighters execute a sharp U-turn over the scarlet lake. With slow-motion horror they came out of that turn and vectored straight toward the ledge.

Jade ignited her lightsaber again and shouted, "Get back!"

Nat started toward her, but his mother waved her arm and sent a massive gust of air backward. It picked Nat off his feet, even lifted the Yuuzhan Vong, and hurled them away. Nat landed hard against hard stone and still he called for his mother. When he looked in her direction he saw her standing on the ledge, a thin old woman in a white Jedi tunic, her long white hair blowing free in strong wind as the fighter swooped down on her.

And in the Force he sensed her mounting power, that raw Force-energy she could summon without anger or hate or

fear. The fighters released a single warhead each, one, two, tree. Slower than a laser-flash, but not slow enough, the concussion missiles dropped from the sky and fell directly toward Jade. She summoned another burst of hot air that threw Nat and the warriors further back. Nat tried to call out but howling wind and roaring engines drowned his voice.

He watched as his mother, a small white lonely figure, let her lightsaber drop to her side and shut down. She raised her other hand, palm-out, as if to refuse the three missiles screaming toward her.

Then there was a flash and a roar. White filled everything, then faded to black. Nat felt incredible breaking pain, the kind that should have ended in oblivion. But somehow the pain faltered. Black faded to shades of crimson and grey. Feeling returned to his body, creeping past the crumbling wall of pain.

Nat realized he was on his back, surrounded by black stone rubble. Heavy weight pressed on one side; he tried to shift and pain spread out from cracked ribs. He blinked his eyes to focus and saw one leg bent in three places, saw dark blood pooled around the place where his lower left leg had shattered. The sight of white bone tearing through skin and trouser-leg almost made him pass out, but the memory of his mother standing pale and brave and suicidally alone against those missiles warded off unconsciousness.

He looked away from his wound, saw dark figures moving against the dark sky. He fumbled among the rocks and found no lightsaber. Then he remembered the blaster he'd hooked to his belt. It was still there. With trembling hands he took it out and made sure it was set to kill.

Then a shadow appeared directly over him. His body shook and a hand grabbed his blaster, ably slipping one finger beneath the trigger to prevent it from firing.

"It is us, *Jeedai*," the Yuuzhan Vong hissed. Besh Lah.

"My... my leg," Nat croaked. "My karking *leg*..."

Another shadow appeared: Khat Lah. Together the Yuuzhan Vong removed the boulder that had smashed his leg, then the one crunching on his side. The weight was gone but Nat didn't dare move or look at his mangled leg. Instead

he propped himself on his elbows to look above the field of rubble. Black scree tumbled downslope into the lava field. The missile explosion must have destroyed the entire ledge, caved in the mountainside-

He reached out for his mother in the Force. To his shock he still felt her, alive but very weak. He looked around again and saw the forms of two starfighters, engines dead and suspended by repulsors over the slope.

He didn't dare reach out to the pilots with the Force. He knew what he'd find but couldn't bring himself to form the name, not even in his mind.

He spotted one dark figure pick up a limp body in both arms and carry it toward the fighter.

Nat wanted to scream. He tried to rise up and then all he felt was pain. He opened his mouth but Besh Lah shoved his armored wrist inside, cutting off all sounds. As Nat bit down hard on the vonduun buckler, Khat Lah pulled that animal-skin cape off his shoulders and flung it over all three of them. Then all Nat saw was blackness; all he felt was pain and the hot pulse of Yuuzhan Vong breath in his face.

When the pain subsided enough, Nat removed his mouth from Besh Lah's arms and panted, "What... what is this?"

"A cloak of *nuun*," Khat Lah's disembodied voice whispered. "A gift from the master shaper. It will camouflage us."

It might hide the Yuuzhan Vong, but Nat didn't know if it could shield a Jedi from *them*. His pulse pounded in his ears and was joined by the roar of starfighter engines going hot. The engine-roar took forever to reach crescendo, then faded quickly. Once the sound was totally gone, Khat Lah pulled back his cloak, revealing the familiar desolation of black rubble sloping toward a scarlet lake.

Nat rested on his back, looking away from those things to the smoke-dark sky. His mind grappled with all they'd lost: the freighter, the shuttle, Vua Yaght, probably Master Valiss and her two knights-

The last loss, the greatest, forced him onto his elbows again. To the Yuuzhan Vong he growled, "Do something with my leg. Set a splint and get me upright. *Now*."

Besh Lah flustered. “*Jeedai* Skywalker, your wound-”

“We have to get to the factory. They have her,” Nat choked.
“The *Sith* have my mother.”

Chapter Eighteen

As expected, the Imperials were putting up a brave fight for Ord Lithone. From *Krakana's* bridge, Kol had a good view of it all: the Alliance ships pushing against orbital defenses, the star destroyers coming around to counterattack on the Alliance's flanks, the swarming starfighters and capital ships slugging it out with broadsides. *Krakana* was no exception from the brawl; though it was in the heart of the Alliance formation, starfighters and bombers nipped at its shields.

There were no major volleys to rock the deck and throw Kol off his feet, and he was thankful for that at least. He hadn't dropped into any Jedi meditative pose yet, but all he had to do was reach out slightly with the Force to feel Lowbacca, Wolf Sazen, and all the other Jedi pilots out there, fiercely engaged in the battle around them.

Kol felt something else in the Force: the distant agony of many lives winking out at once. At the same time a few cheers rippled across the bridge, incongruous with what he'd felt. He glanced at *Krakana's* tactical display and saw that one of the Golan VII defense platforms over Ord Lithone had been knocked out of orbit. What was left of it seemed to be burning up in orbit.

"Excellent," he heard Admiral Lekhwash hiss, and then the Quarren raised his voice. "Tell Captain Peshnar to press forward. Refrain from launching ground forces, but try to secure a foothold in low orbit. Have Needlo's ships reinforce them."

As the tactical officers hurried to comply, Lekhwash sidestepped next to Kol and said, "We're far from done, but it's going well so far."

"I understand that. Unless the Imperials have surprises waiting. Backup, for instance."

"Hyperspace routes to Ord Lithone are blocked by our interditors. I'm more worried about ground defenses on the planet. That's why I want to shore up our strength in orbit before we attempt landing."

Kol nodded. He couldn't match even the admiral's guarded optimism. It wasn't the battle in front of him. He was distracted by a nagging dread, something he felt must be connected to Nat and his mother's mission to Mustafar. That was happening on the far side of the galaxy, and there was nothing he could do about it, which made the feeling worse.

Lekhwash looked around the bridge and said of the crew, "We're far from over, but they deserve to feel like they're accomplishing something. A fighting spirit wins half the battle."

As a Jedi, Kol knew that well. "So we just have to worry about the other half."

"Indeed." Lekhwash's mouth-tentacles curled. "And unfortunately, it's usually the harder one."

As a Nagai warlord he'd mostly waged fierce offensives, overwhelming the enemy with fast attacks from all directions. He'd known there was value in stealth, in jabbing your enemy with a poison needle instead of hacking him with blades, but it was only since entering the tutelage of the Sith that he understood their true power.

His battered starfighter groaned and hummed around him as he wove it through the battle zone toward the Alliance flagship. His mind flashed back to the battle over Terminus, his last with the Nagai, where Darth Wyyrlok had pulled him from the coffin of his wrecked fighter. He would finally enter a new life after today, with a new name. He was not an artful being, but he appreciated the symmetry.

Instead of a Nagai snubfighter he was now tucked inside a Crossfire, obtained by the One Sith and painted Alliance

colors. The battle damage- a torn S-foil, a dying engine, a black gash beneath the cockpit- were all authentically earned. After slipping into the fray, he'd carefully allowed TIE Predators to wreak damage on his ship. Every time he'd risked death, and every time he'd used the Force to stay alive. Adrenaline was rushing through his body.

Now he could barely keep his fighter flying, but that was enough. The mighty *Krakana* was dead ahead, and he sent the flagship's flight control a brief, static-garbled message saying he was coming in for emergency landing. Flight control told him to hold position. He told them that was no longer possible.

And so, risking death for ascension yet again, he plunged his Crossfire toward *Krakana*'s secondary starboard hangar mouth. He killed engines, warmed repulsors, and let inertia carry him toward the portal.

He caught the flicker of a deactivating energy shield, just in time. He dropped landing gear and made a barely-controlled touchdown on the flight deck. His ship skidded violently, metal screaming against metal before it finally touched down.

He popped his cockpit and scrambled out. *Krakana*'s deck crew was rushing to spray his overheated fighter with coolant; the last thing they wanted was the thing to catch fire. In a worst-case scenario, the concussion missile magazine inside might burst, ripping the hangar open from the inside.

The crew was so concerned with the damaged fighter that they barely paid attention to the pilot. Those who did saw a figure in a baggy orange flight suit, helmet still on, stagger away. In addition to donning Alliance garb, he'd cut his long black hair short and dyed the skin of his pure-white Nagai face to match more common human tones.

He looked around the hangar, saw all the Alliance personnel occupied, and hurried to the nearest exit. There was only one place he'd find Admiral Lekhwash in the middle of a battle, but he did not hurry there. It was a long way to *Krakana*'s bridge, and there were a lot of things he needed to do before he made his kill. Everything needed to be perfectly prepared before he acted. All of this was for

nothing if he did not survive to take his new title, and his new name.

The splint only did so much, and if he put weight on his leg it was unbearable. It was all Nat could do to call on the Force to push back the pain and stay conscious. He moved with the Yuuzhan Vong through the rubble, slowly and gradually toward the factory. It seemed to perch on the cliffside, looming over the lake of lava. Nat had no crutch to move with, and he alternated between clinging to the shoulders of Khat Lah and Besh Lah.

To Nat's relief and surprise, the Sith did not have any scouts around the factory's perimeter, either on foot or in the air. They seemed to have thought their enemies accounted for. He refrained from reaching out with the Force and alerting them otherwise. He felt his mother deep inside, weak and injured and maybe unconscious but still alive. For now, that had to suffice. That alone was reason to keep moving, even through the pain.

He still had his lightsaber. That was some help. When they reached the base of the factory it wasn't difficult to find the hatch of an auxiliary entrance. The Yuuzhan Vong set him down on the rock to examine the door. He risked one glance at what they'd put around his lower leg, a Yuuzhan Vong bio-concoction that had snapped broken bones into something vaguely like their initial places and staunched the bleeding. If he got out of this without a limp he'd count himself lucky.

With a grunt, Nat held out his lightsaber. "Use it," he said. "Be careful."

The Yuuzhan Vong stared at it for so long he expected them to refuse. When Khat Lah wrapped his hand around the metal cylinder he looked either reverent or afraid. Maybe both. The warrior tapped the button on, extending the golden blade. Very carefully, he used it to cut through the metal clamp sealing the door. He retracted the blade and handed it back to Nat, then joined Besh Lah in swinging the heavy door open.

Nat had no idea if that set off alarm, but they'd found out one way or the other. Leaning on Besh Lah's shoulder he

followed Khat Lah and hobbled into the utilitarian metal hallway. The path quickly dead-ended into a shaft with ladder-rungs leading down perhaps ten meters.

"Cling to my back, *Jeedai*," Besh Lah offered. "I will carry you."

Because he didn't have much choice, Nat wrapped his arms around the warrior's collar and hoped the thud bug bandolier around his chest didn't start snapping. The three of them clambered down the ladder, deeper into the facility. The air was warmer than Nat had expected, but it still had the recycled, metallic flavor of an aged climate control system. He had no idea how big this factory was, but he suspected it had been built before the Sith started using it as a front for their covert activities. If much of it was unused or abandoned, so much the better.

Once they were down the lower corridor, Nat hobbled along on Khat Lah's shoulder. He told the warrior, "We need to find public access terminal. Get a map of this place. See what we're up against."

"I understand," the warrior nodded. "But we are... not familiar with this type of place."

Nat had never been to Mustafar, but he'd spent years doing Jedi work in the degraded, industrialized, and forgotten corners out of the Outer Rim. "Don't worry. I think I can handle it."

As they moved through the halls Nat kept himself open to the Force. He did not use his powers actively, but he let himself feel the dim presence of other life-forms. The Yuuzhan Vong were blind to him, as always, but he could feel others, thankfully distant.

When they found an access terminal, Nat went to work. He pulled up a holographic map of the factory's interior and spent several minutes scouring its tangled maze of corridors and machinery. He still wasn't sure what this place made, now or previously, but it seemed to draw lava from the molten lake on which it sat. Almost half of the structure was totally subterranean, and most of that was devoted to processing lava and converting it to energy. The map also marked four separate hangar bays, each big enough to fit a

shuttle inside, but they gave no indication if any of those bays were occupied.

As much as Nat wanted to rescue his mother, there was no point unless they had a way out of this place. He memorized the paths to the hangars and said, "We need to get to a ship first. Once we've secured something... We'll go get my mother."

He caught the look that passed between the Yuuzhan Vong. Besh Lah said, "Master *Jeedai*... in your condition, you are in no shape to battle Sith."

"I'll figure out something."

"Do you know where Master Skywalker is?" asked Khat Lah.

His mother could be anywhere in this vast place, and there was only one way to find her. To do so risked alerting to Sith to his presence, but there was no other choice. Nat took a deep breath, braced himself with both hands on the console, and stared hard at the map. He'd already committed its glowing pathways to memory. Now, with those familiar spaces resonating in his mind, he allowed himself to search for her within its halls and chambers.

Nat did not grope for other minds in the Force; that would surely alert the Sith. Instead he reached deep inside himself and found the place that had always connected to his mother. He remembered the years of training and gentle encouragement, the consolation she'd given her sons after their father died and his name was unfairly slandered. His mother represented wisdom and quiet strength, things he admired even when he didn't emulate them. He felt the Jade inside him and through her felt the Jade without: still weak but struggling back to consciousness. As Nat touched that mind and only that mind he stared at the holo-map, desperately seeking the its location among all those corridors and chambers.

Then he felt that mind burst to full awareness. He felt his mother, and she felt him. He pulled away immediately; his sharp gasp made the Yuuzhan Vong grab him by the shoulders.

"I felt her," Nat said. "She's awake."

“Do you know where she is?” asked Besh Lah.

Nat stared at that holo-display and tried to match its map with the fast-fleeting sensation of his mother’s touch. He found himself drawn to one glowing rectangle, larger than most others, located at the factory’s second-highest level on the wall facing the molten lake. An observation area, perhaps.

“She’s here.” Nat pointed to the marker. “Now figure how to get there from the hangar and let’s get out of here.”

As Khat Lah studied the map, Besh Lah asked, “Did your search alert the Sith?”

“We’ll find out one way or another,” Nat grunted. And one way or another, they’d find out too soon.

He tried to push that out of his mind. He and the Yuuzhan Vong staggered their way toward the nearest hangar as fast as they could. Several more times, Nat had to cling pathetically to a warrior’s back as they climbed down rungs of utility ladders. Taking lifts was too risky.

All the while Nat kept his Force awareness open, sensing for nearby minds without actively seeking them. He could feel some stirring, but none seemed to be hunting for him and none seemed too close. As he’d suspected, this former factory had been hollowed out. Whatever Sith minions hid inside now used only a fraction of its former space, and he started to wonder whether there’d even be ships in the hangar.

Wondering almost led him to distraction. The shortest path to the nearest hangar cut across a broad storage room, and as the three of them slipped from one side to the other Nat realized someone else was about to enter.

“Get down!” Nat whispered. “We have to hide!”

The Yuuzhan Vong pulled him into the overhang-shadow of one storage crate. The move jostled his leg and to keep from screaming Nat bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. He heard the door open, heard footsteps. Khat Lah drew his cloak off his shoulders and threw it over all three of them once again. He’d described it as a special bio-form that camouflaged itself to match its surroundings, but Nat had no idea how well it could mimic metal crates.

The Yuuzhan Vong gave no signal in the Force, but Nat did. He resisted temptation to reach out and mark the

newcomer's location. Instead he pushed the Force away, refusing even the faint connection with his mother. He thought of nothing but the clack of approaching footsteps and the way his heart pounded in the darkness.

He heard the steps come closer and reached for his lightsaber. Using it, killing whoever this was, would surely alert the enemy and bring more Sith down on them. Nat was prepared to strike anyway, and he waited in the dark and listened, and his heart didn't stop racing as the footsteps drifted away. He only relaxed when he heard the door slide open, the visitor walk out, and the door shut behind them.

Even then he resisted using the Force. Khat Lah pulled back his cloak, exposing them to the light again. "Is he gone, *Jeedai*?"

"I think so," Nat breathed. "We should keep going."

"Agreed," said Besh Lah, and in conjunction with the other warrior he grabbed Nat by either shoulder and lifted him to his feet. This time he was ready and didn't have to bite his lip for the pain.

They continued on their way, passing through the same door their unseen visitor had. Nat knew they were getting close to the hangar when he spotted security cameras. He used just enough Force power to scramble them as the three stumbled past.

Besh Lah guided Nat into the hangar and relief washed over him. There was one ship sitting there, unguarded. It was a markedly ordinary Corellian freighter, the kind favored by middling merchants and secretive agents alike. Heavy blast doors sealed it off from the churning lava lake outside. Opening them would probably alert the Sith, but Nat noted the freighter had a top-mounted quad-laser turret. Barring those, a lightsaber might do the trick.

The Yuuzhan Vong helped Nat into the shuttle. Once they lowered the ramp, all three ascended into the empty hold. He imagined the Sith or their agents used this for smuggling or even mundane cargo runs to other locations on Mustafar.

Whatever the case, it was perfect. After settling his battered body in the cockpit he said, "I can fly this thing, no

problem. Getting through those doors might be tricky... but I can do the rest."

"Excellent," said Khat Lah. "You can prepare out escape while we retrieve your mother."

Nat took a deep breath. He'd known this was coming but he had no reply. He'd been trying to push its inevitability from his mind.

"I can sense the Sith. I'll know how to avoid them." Nat said. "You can't."

"The Sith can sense *you*," said Khat Lah. "We are blind to them. Utterly. I have burned the route to Master Skywalker in my memory. I can get us there."

"You have no idea what you'll find when you get there."

"Neither do you."

"I've killed Sith before."

"You cannot even stand," Besh Lah said.

He looked at the mess of his leg. There was no argument against that. The thought of being stuck here, waiting for these strange aliens he barely knew to rescue Jade, made him want to scream. As a Jedi he'd felt overshadowed by Kol's ambition and charisma, his mother's wisdom and strength, his father's self-sacrifice. He'd never felt like a real failure until now.

But there was no argument. If he tried to go with them he'd only doom the rescue. Nat may have been a poor Jedi but he was not prideful and not a fool. With a heavy sigh he took his lightsaber from his belt and held it out. "This might come in handy."

Khat Lah took it. "I will bring this back."

"You'd better," Nat said. "It's a loaner from a friend of mine."

The Yuuzhan Vong didn't understand, but they nodded. Sitting in the pilot seat, he watched them leave the freighter, slip out of the hangar, and continue the mission he could not.

The battle at Ord Lithone was progressing in the Alliance's favor. A collection of Mon Cal cruisers had seized a foothold in the planet's lower orbit. They'd refrained from launching troops to the surface, as surrounding space was still highly

contested, but Lekhwash was about to order a second attack wave targeting another Golan station. With its orbital defenses stripped, Ord Lithone would be vulnerable to insertions at multiple points. If the Alliance could successfully capture the planet and drive the enemy away, it could begin a deeper drive into Imperial territory, splitting their fleets and supply lines, taking system after system until Roan Fel begged for mercy.

Still, Kol couldn't shake the feeling of mounting dread. He was no longer sure if it was linked to Nat and his mother's Mustafar mission, as he'd first supposed, or to something closer. It was maddening, and when it became too much he quietly slipped away from Lekhwash's side and went to the communications station.

"Ensign," he told a squat young Aleena, "Please prepare a transmission to the Jedi Temple on Ossus."

The ensign blinked oversized eyes in surprise, then nodded. "Understood, Master Jedi."

As small blue hands worked the console, anxiety seized Kol again. It was stronger than ever, almost like a physical hand on his chest. This wasn't about Nat and his mother, he was sure of that. The danger was immediate and close. It was *right here*-

He spun on his heel just as the sound of laserfire tore through the bridge. Kol saw Admiral Lekhwash, standing at the tactical station, stagger and drop. His body twisted as he fell, revealing the smoking hole in the back of his head.

Security teams scrambled, some for the admiral, some for the bridge entrance. Kol grabbed his lightsaber and saw some guards raise their blasters for a single black-haired figure in a bulky orange flight suit.

The guards fired. Alarm sounded. The entire bridge jerked violently, as though something inside *Krakana* had exploded. A wave of invisible energy threw half the bridge crew to the deck. Kol was slammed hard into the comm console and nearly dropped his weapon. A scarlet lightsaber ignited in the black-haired figure's hand, flashed through the air, and cleaved three guards in half.

It all happened too fast.

Shock delayed Kol only for a moment, but that was enough for the black-haired figure, the assassin, to strike down the guards and dash off the bridge. More tremors shook the deck. Kol pushed away from the console and raced for the exit. Medics and guards and crewmen had formed a wreath around Lekhwash's fallen form, but Kol did not stop, did not look at the admiral. He already knew Lekhwash was dead.

He reached out further with the Force. Amidst all the confused and panicked crew there was one beacon that blazed with certainty, with anger and hatred and the dark side. Kol chased it, tearing down halls as fast as he could. Her made one sharp turn, then another, and felt himself grow close. Kol slid around one last corner and stared down a short corridor littered with cleaved, smoking bodies. At the end were the parted entrance doors to a turbolift.

Standing inside the lift was the black-haired figure with a lightsaber in his hand. Across the distance his eyes met Kol's. They blazed red-gold, like a Sith's, and his lips parted to bear a sharp-toothed mocking smile.

Then the doors closed. The lift plunged. Kol sprinted, jumped over bodies, and let himself slide hard into the closed doors. With three slashes of his lightsaber he carved a hole and jumped through. The lift capsule was falling fast down its shaft; Kol fell faster. He landed hard on the top of the capsule and plunged his lightsaber through the roof. He tore through machinery, triggering the capsule's emergency brakes. He Force-pushed the cut-through section of the roof down into the capsule and followed it boots-first. He came up, swung his lightsaber high to deflect the coming attack-
-and found himself in an empty capsule.

Kol swore and kicked the wall in anger. Struggling for calm he reached out with the Force and found Lekhwash's assassin. He'd escaped from the lift and was several levels above but making his way down via another route. He had to be heading for an escape vessel in one of the hangar bays.

Kol plucked the comlink and thumbed it on. He hailed the bridge and hoped someone was listening.

"This is Skywalker! The assassin is trying to escape! Secure all hangars immediately! Do not let *anyone* leave *Krakana*!"

He barked his orders again. He couldn't tell if anyone heard. He shut off the comlink, kicked the wall again, then tried to figure a way out of here.

He ran. His legs ached for the strain and his lungs strained for breath, but beneath that he was filled with a buoyant joy. He'd boarded *Krakana*, slain the Alliance's admiral, tipped the battle and perhaps the war in the Empire's favor. The Sith were finally on their path to deserved ascendance, and it was all because of *him*.

But to reap the reward for his triumph, he had to get off this damned ship before the Jedi caught him. The Jedi was powerful; he could feel the human's blazing determination in the Force and knew he was far away but getting closer. He was not certain, but he suspected his pursuer was none other than Kol Skywalker, leader of the Jedi Council, architect of the Ossus Project, and descendant of Darth Vader himself.

The Jedi was the only thing that could stop his escape. Dressed in his orange flight suit, lightsaber tucked into a utility pouch, he hurried through *Krakana*'s hallways unnoticed by its crew. The warheads aboard his Crossfire had exploded just as he'd arranged, drawing emergency crews and causing panic. Now word of Lekhwash's death was spreading, adding to the confusion.

Before going to the bridge he'd taken time to familiarize himself with the insides of this warship. He'd planned several escape routes in his head, and they allowed him to travel quickly from the bridge down to the portside hangar.

When he reached his destination, he found what he'd expected to find: a *Crix*-class courier shuttle, a handful of D-wing bombers refitting for escort duty.

What lay between him and the ships was unexpected, but not wholly surprising. A half-dozen technicians and a full dozen guards emanated confusion in the Force, but they turned to him as one.

"Sir!" one guard called as he approached. "This is a restricted area! Please leave immediately!"

The Nagai walked forward with feigned hesitation. "I was ordered to report to my ship." He gestured toward the D-

wings. "The rest of my flight's on their way. They'll be here in a few minutes."

"On whose authority?" The lead guard frowned. The one behind him put a hand on his sidearm but didn't draw.

"The captain's. Haven't you heard? The admiral's *dead*."

"We know that. That's why the ship's on lockdown."

He threw up his hands. "Fine. Call the bridge, they'll confirm my orders."

The lead guard hesitated. A touch of the Force made him relent. "All right." He pulled out his comlink. "What's your name?"

It had been a long time since he'd been asked that. It brought out an involuntary, hissing laugh. The guards frowned. The one with the pistol tensed. He reached out with the Force and felt the Jedi getting close, so close.

"I am *nothing*," he said, "But I am far greater than you."

The lightsaber hidden in his belt-strapped pouch ignited. The red blade sheared through fabric and took to the air. The saber's Force-propelled arc cut down four guards before they knew what was happening. The weapon slapped into his hand and he darted forward, cutting down two more guards before they could unholster their weapons. Another two got their blasters out and opened fire; he batted their bolts artfully back, dropping them both with smoking holes in the chest, then lunged forward and speared another guard through the chest.

The remaining crew and guards were scrambling. Some tried to flee, others to call for help. A few tried bravely, stupidly to fight him. He severed one guard's head, slashed another through the waist.

The Jedi announced his presence with a clarion-call in the Force. Removing his red blade from a crewman's gut, the Nagai turned in time to see the Jedi charging across the corpse-littered deck.

He dropped back to one foot and raised his blade in a defensive stance. Even as he leaped through the air, the Jedi called on a wave of Force energy that knocked his opponent backward, off balance. Blade smashed into blade and the Nagai could barely keep from toppling over.

The red-haired Jedi- it had to be Kol Skywalker- swung horizontally. The Nagai bent his whole body back and felt blue heat sizzle just above his eyes. When the blade was past he rolled into a backward somersault. As he came up he called on his anger as Darth Vorkan had shown him and flung a burst of sizzling Force energy from his hand. The move caught Skywalker by surprise, and the Jedi struggled to catch the lightning on his blade.

The Nagai sprinted for the nearest D-wing. He jumped, used the Force to extend to his leap, and landed boots-first on its long port wing.

Then the Jedi came down right in front of him, close enough to strike. Skywalker's attacks were fast as lightning, and the Nagai could barely move his blade to deflect. He felt himself being pushed toward the edge of the wing and knew he could lose balance at any moment.

The Jedi lunged even closer. Skywalker's blade pushed his to the side and the Jedi pivoted, snapping one elbow into the Nagai's face. Pain exploded; he staggered and fell off the wing. He landed hard on his back and when his eyes popped open the Jedi was falling on him, lightsaber angled down for a killing blow.

He barely rolled out of the way in time. As he came to his feet, Skywalker lashed out with a leg and tripped him. He sprawled across the flight deck and his lightsaber went skidding away. Skywalker advanced on him, righteous Jedi determination in his eyes, lightsaber hefted for another strike. He summoned his anger again and released another Force-blast. Skywalker was ready for this one, and he not only caught it on his lightsaber but deflected it back. Agonizing energy scorched the Nagai; he screamed out loud and through his pain realized that he was about to fail after coming so far.

The thought enraged him, and rage gave him strength to survive. He couldn't beat Skywalker, not here, not now, but he could escape. He found his lightsaber in the Force, ignited it, and sent it darting through the air.

He didn't aim for Skywalker. He sent his lightsaber flying directly into the hull of the nearest D-wing. The energy blade

cut through the armored plating, into the compartment where its fuel reserves lay.

The resulting explosion knocked the Jedi off his feet and blinded them both. As the Nagai staggered to his feet he saw that two D-wings were utterly destroyed, two more on fire. One at the end of the row, closest to the hangar mouth, looked usable and he ran to it.

He dropped into the cockpit, started power, closed the transparisteel bubble around himself. Through the smoke and fire he couldn't see Skywalker but he felt the Jedi's dazed presence. When he kicked in the repulsors a gust of air blew away the smoke and he could see Skywalker with his lightsaber in hand, standing, facing the D-wing as it lifted off.

He couldn't resist the urge. Even as he backed toward the hangar mouth he tapped the control stick and sent a pair of heavy laser blasts shooting toward the Jedi.

Skywalker stood firm, angled his lightsaber, and caught both bolts. He bounced them back; one missed the D-wing but the other shredded its unshielded port wing. The entire ship rocked and nearly smashed down into the deck. Swearing again, the Nagai wrestled it under control, spun it around, and fired engines to full. His fighter shot out into space and the increasingly confused battle over Ord Lithone.

His hands were shaking; his breath rattled. He'd escaped, but only barely. He'd underestimated the power of a Jedi, or a Skywalker. It shamed him and stole the thrill of triumph he'd expected to feel at this moment, the culmination of his Sith training, his entire life.

He told himself he could settle accounts with Skywalker later. He would be a Sith Lord soon, named and anointed. From here he could only grow more powerful, and there would be plenty of opportunities to test himself against Jedi now that the Sith had revealed themselves.

He clung to that knowledge and felt some of the satisfaction he'd hoped for.

At one point, as he and Besh Lah cowered behind the cloak of *nuun* and listened to Sith footfalls pass their darkened hiding place, Khat Lah wondered why he was doing this.

This retrieval mission would almost certainly fail. Two Yuuzhan Vong warriors were no match for a nest full of Sith. Immediately flying away in that freighter would have at least saved three lives. Now all were likely to be lost, and though it was shameful to admit, Khat Lah badly wanted to live.

His mind darted back one long year ago, to the attack on the Jedi Temple at Ossus. He'd bravely stood guard over the younglings there, he'd thought because of the debt he owed the late Reikar Horn, but on reflection he saw his motivation had been clouded by shame and attenuate pride. That same mixed motivation had led him to forsake Zonama Sekot and stay with the Jedi in the first place, and to bring his two companions with him.

Vua Yaght was dead now, incinerated in an instant. That laid bare to cost of Khat Lah's desire and filled him with new motivations: guilt and anger, for himself and for the Sith who'd killed his friend. Jade Skywalker said hatred was a dark side trait, but Khat Lah was no Jedi and it seemed wholly appropriate now.

But that was not all. The Skywalker woman had shown him kindness and tried to teach him some of what he'd never understand. He appreciated that, and appreciated her. Perhaps the urge to repay kindness was the reason he'd embarked on this suicidal mission. But there were many reasons; no one's motives were pure.

When he was sure the Sith was gone, Khat Lah withdrew the cloak of *nuun* and swung it over his shoulders again. He and Besh Lah stood up and scanned the emptied hallway.

Besh Lah whispered, "To the ladder."

"To the ladder," Khat Lah agreed.

They hurried down the corridor, made two turns, and entered the auxiliary access shaft. They climbed bare metal rungs up five more levels. According to the map Khat Lah had memorized, that put them two levels beneath the observation room where Jade Skywalker was being held. He trusted Nat Skywalker's directions implicitly.

They exited the shaft into the attached corridor. They approached the nearest intersection, heard voices, and ducked back into the shadowed end of the hall. They

crouched down; Khat Lah threw up his cloak again. He knew the camouflage was not perfect, and if he'd been visible in the Force he'd have been caught already. As it was, they squatted in the darkness and listened to footfalls and voices.

One voice said, "It will only take a few minutes to prepare the freighter. Once we're in the air--"

"I know our orders," the second voice rasped. "I wish we weren't being sent away."

"Darth Vorkan's command is absolute," the first voice admonished.

"We know that," said a third. "Still, to see him break the Jedi..."

Khat Lah listened to their voices, tracked their movements. They were crossing the intersection from the perpendicular hallway, heading toward the lift tube that fell directly down to the hangar. They were talking about the ship *Nat Skywalker* was in right now, he was sure of it.

A broken Jedi was no match for three Sith. Without *Nat*, without his ship, this mission was a guaranteed failure.

There was no choice. Besh Lah knew what had to be done and started to rise. Khat Lah pulled up the cloak, looked forward, and caught a black-booted heel and the tip of cape slip through the intersection.

They advanced. Their movements were short and light, making as little around as possible. Khat Lah readied his amethyst staff; Besh Lah removed two thud bugs from his bandolier and gripped one in either hand. When they got to the intersection they peered around the corner. Down the long hall, three figures in black body armor and capes were stepping into the lift tube.

The two *Yuuzhan Vong* charged as one. They made no battle-cry, but their footsteps alerted the Sith. As all three turned around, Besh Lah hurled the thud bug in this right hand. The Sith were plainly stunned by the sight in front of them, and the nearest one took too long to pull out his lightsaber. The thud bug landed at his feet and burst with the power of a grenade.

The explosion rocked the corridor and filled it with smoke. The warriors charged ahead into the wreckage of the lift.

Though they could barely see, they thrust their elongated amphistaffs into the bodies on the ground, making sure they were dead.

"The others will feel these deaths," hissed Khat Lah. "They will come."

"Then we'd best get out of here."

Calling on the memorized map, Khat Lah led them down several hooked corridors until they found the second auxiliary access shaft. They pulled open the hatch and stepped inside. Besh Lah had two hands on the ladder-rungs when black-booted feet fell on his shoulders, knocking him to the ground.

Shock didn't slow Khat Lah. He lashed out with his amphistaff, which crackled and hissed against the lit blood-red blade of their attacker. It was some horned-headed humanoid, face marked in black and red tattoos more fearsome than any Yuuzhan Vong warrior's. Khat Lah's second attack pushed the Sith off Besh Lah. As the warrior bounded to his feet a second Sith, a bald-headed human woman, dropped to the bottom of the shaft.

The Yuuzhan Vong were pushed back into the hallway. Khat Lah knew how Force-users fought; they communicated battle movements to each other without words, like yammosks. More Sith were surely on the way. These ones attacked with more ferocity than any Jedi, and the Yuuzhan Vong were pushed further back as they frantically parried. On jabbing thrust from the female Sith took Besh Lah in the shoulder; he grunted in pain but kept fighting.

Khat Lah heard footsteps behind them but didn't dare look away from the horned Sith attacking him. In the corner of his vision he caught a door on his left and snapped an elbow into its control panel. The door opened and he backed through, Besh Lah right behind him.

The room led nowhere. It was darkened, lit only by the red glow of lava visible beyond its broad transparisteel window. One of the tall power vanes that jut out from the factory face over the lake made for a thick pillar of black against the red.

Three Sith pushed into the room after them. Besh Lah hurled a thud bug at them but the female Sith cut it in half

with her lightsaber. Khat Lah snapped instruction in their own language, and Besh Lah understood. He pivoted and threw another thud bug right into the window.

It smashed into the transparisteel, shattering it. Some stabbing shard fell out into the lava and brimstone; other fell into the room. They tore at the cloak of *nuun* on Besh Lah's back and cut painful bleeding bites into his legs and arms. The Sith had called on the Force to shield themselves from the shrapnel and they charged as one, fast and uninjured.

The Yuuzhan Vong fell back. They jumped over scattered shards and propelled themselves out the window. The thick horizontal pylon connecting the vertical vane to the factory was right beneath them, but it was a long fall. The warriors tucked in their legs and rolled to avoid injury but it was still a hard impact, and Besh Lah nearly fell off the pylon into the churning lava below.

The Sith fell after them, Force-assisted and graceful. Like a trio of black carrion birds they landed in front of the battered Yuuzhan Vong, sabers lifted, ready to attack.

Khat Lah's amphistaff clashed against the nearest blade and the Sith tried to back him toward the pylon edge. He flipped his grip on the amphistaff so its fanged head was angled upward, and when the Sith next struck he commanded it to spit venom in his attacker's face. The Sith staggered back, hissing, and that was all Khat Lah needed to swing out a leg, knock the Sith off balance, and drop him into the lava below.

He rushed to help Besh Lah, who was battling two Sith at once and had his back pressed to the power vane's vertical rise. The second before Khat Lah joined the fight, the horned Sith slipped through his friend's defenses and speared Besh Lah in the gut, doubling him over. His weapon dropped from his hand, rolled and fell off the pylon.

Khat Lah howled and thrust his amphistaff like a spear at the Sith. His enemy sidestepped and batted the attack upward with the swipe of his saber. The female Sith turned on him too, and Khat Lah barely jumped back from her attack.

Facing two enemies at once, he remembered the weapon Nat Skywalker had given him. He pulled the cool, hard

cylinder from his belt and ignited it. The weightless gold blade stunned the Sith, which was what Khat Lah needed. He dropped shoulders low and charged the horned one, living and constructed blades both angled for the Sith's gut. The Sith moved to block but Khat Lah ordered his amphistaff to slacken into a whip. When it contact the Sith's blade it wrapped its body around the red light, restraining it so Khat Lah could plunged the lightsaber into the Sith's stomach. He pulled back, kicked, and sent the Sith off the pylon's edge into the inferno.

The last Sith lunged in to attack but stopped a half-meter from Khat Lah. The woman gagged as Besh Lah's armored forearm cut into her neck and his short-blade couffe cut into her stomach.

But her shock didn't last. Her face twisted into a snarl. She reversed grip on her lightsaber and plunged it into her own chest, spearing through her heart and Besh Lah's both. For a half-second the warrior's face went slack in death. Then both bodies tipped off the pylon and fell into the lake of fire.

Khat Lah howled. Two companions, both dead, both lead to death because they'd followed *him*. His need for redemption and honor had cursed them; his lofty aims had doomed them all.

But that wasn't the whole truth. As he stared at the weapons in his hands- one Jedi, one Yuuzhan Vong- he told himself the Sith had killed them. He burned with anger inside. The Jedi looked down on revenge, but Yuuzhan Vong did not. Khat Lah knew which one he was.

He straightened, looked around, took stock of where he was. There were no more Sith in sight, but more would surely come to investigate the deaths of their comrades. He could not go back inside the way he'd come. The tall vertical vane jutted skyward, almost to the top height of the factory. He squinted and saw, high above, the tall broad window of the observation room.

He looked at the window, at the vane, and judged distance. Perhaps he could jump it, though he had no idea how he'd break through the window. Besh Lah had taken his thud bugs

with him into the lake of fire. The lightsaber, perhaps. It would have to do.

The only way seemed to be up. Khat Lah shut off the lightsaber and tucked it into his belt. As for the amphistaff, he coiled its tail-end around his forearm, then lashed out. Its fanged mouth gripped firmly into the metal side of the vane. Slowly, painfully, with the determination of one resigned to die, Khat Lah began his ascent.

Chapter Nineteen

It had been her son's brief touch that stirred Jade Skywalker to waking. Nat had found her and withdrawn, for reasons she didn't understand; she only knew his touch had been tentative, cautious, and that meant they were both in danger.

The return to consciousness was long and slow, even painful. Sensation returned as agonies not her own. The Force was full of rage and pain and dying despair, and it was like reliving the death of her mother all over again. That echoed agony had controlled her as a child, defined her, and for a long time divided her from her father and the Force.

Jade was far older now, and she'd learned resilience. She called on the strength within her to push the agonies away.

When she dared open her eyes, blurred vision focused on human limbs with scorched ends, part of a torso cut through diagonally, half of a head vertically split with one dead eye staring upward and blood spilling from half a mouth. Jade was hanging upside-down, feet bound to the ceiling and hands clasped behind her back. The carnage spread out on the cold metal floor in front of her. She knew them as the pieces of Ceynar Valiss and her two knights. Jade squeezed her eyes shut and had to resist the agony all over again.

They'd died horribly, but that alone did not account for the corruption she felt in the Force. Someone was sustaining the echo of their death, churning it, keeping it fresh and alive as a means to torment her. It was working. Though she forced the agony back and found the calm inside, the effort kept her from using the Force to free herself from her binds.

When she found calm again, she didn't dare open her eyes until she heard a voice said, "We took them alive first. Then we discovered you. You were a gift to us, Jade Skywalker. We decided we did not need these anymore."

Standing directly before her, thankfully occluding some of the carnage, was a tall alien with golden skin tattooed by jagged black designs. It wore black body armor but its long three-joined limbs were bare. Small sharp teeth lined its mouth and its close-set eyes were predatory. A Blood Carver, they were called, but it was more than that. For the tattoos, for the great evil it emanated in the Force, she knew it was a Sith.

With that knowledge she was almost consumed, not by the echoed agony but her own despair. Thirty years ago the Jedi had battled the Sith on Shedu Maad, destroyed their temple, killed their warriors. It had been a great and awful battle, and Jade herself had fought their fearsome Darth Wyyrlok, who'd stood guard outside the tomb where the ancient Darth Krayt had slept. Jade had barely survived; her friend Wharn had not.

That should have been the end of it, but somehow the Sith had survived, like they *always* survived. And it was worse than that. She knew deep down that these Sith had not only captured her and massacred the Jensaarai; they were the phantom menace Kol had been seeking for the past year, the ones who'd ruined the Ossus Project and drawn the whole galaxy into a brutal war.

If the Sith had the power to do all that then they'd never been defeated at Shedu Maad at all. The entire battle had been a shadow-play, the Jedi had been fooled, and the Sith had gathered quiet strength for thirty years. It made bitter mockery of all Jade and her comrades had suffered and died for. She'd never felt defeat like this.

"I have wished all my life to meet a Skywalker," the Blood Carver said. "The Jedi who slayed Darth Xoran and Darth Wyyrlok, the one who defeated the abomination Abeloth for the final time... To my eyes you are just a small human, old and weak-bodied, but in the Force... ah, in the Force you are impressive. It is no wonder you are legend."

She'd never wanted to be anyone's legend. Even those accomplishments he'd rattled off were lies. She'd defeated Darth Xoran with her father, Abeloth with her husband, Darth Wyyrlok with Wharn. In all of those cases her comrade had died and she'd lived to reap the honors of victory.

Jade remembered Nat was out there. She couldn't stand to live through yet another loved one's sacrifice. She closed her eyes and dropped into the Force, finding the quiet place inside her that had always been connected with her son. Even as she touched that place she put the rest of her awareness into pushing back against the Blood Carver's dark pressure, hopefully distracting him as she reached her son.

She felt Nat, and he felt her, and she told him *Go!*

From Nat she felt relief and assurance: *Help is coming.*

Go, she pleaded. No more sacrifices for her sake.

Not me, Nat said, and withdrew from her mind.

She didn't understand. Jade redirected the effort she'd dedicated to Nat and reached out across the entire factory complex. She felt other minds, several dozen of them, all strong with the dark side. Many of them were frantic and seeking, which seemed implausible for Nat's firm confidence.

Then she remembered the Yuuzhan Vong.

Their invisibility in the Force could help them against Sith, but only so much. She remembered one of them, Vua Yaght, had been aboard the ship when it was bombed. That left only two warriors against all these.

They couldn't do it. They would die trying to rescue her. Two more sacrifices for her sake, and both in vain. Tears slipped from her squeezed-tight eyes and ran down her forehead. She wanted to scream.

"Do not cry yet, Skywalker." The Blood Carver's voice dripped with sadistic pleasure. "What you feel are just echoes of their dying agony. It is nothing compared to what Lord Krayt will show you."

Krayt, alive. Jade was already drowning in despair and it did not surprise her, but the Sith seemed in the mood to gloat. It would be no pleasure to oblige him, but it might give Khat Lah some time.

She opened her eyes and said, "I killed Darth Krayt."

"Darth Wyyrlok gave her life so you would believe that," the Blood Carver said. "She was Krayt's loyal servant to the last."

"And you... Wyyrlok's replacement?"

The Blood Carver sissed laughter. "Oh, no. We have a *new* Darth Wyyrlok who is our master's most trusted guardian. I am Lord Krayt's Hand, the extension of his iron will."

His pride was obvious. "Your name?"

"I am called Darth Vorkan. We will travel together to Korriban. Lord Krayt is eager to meet you. It has been many decades since he spoke with a Skywalker."

"You think I'll just *let* you take me?"

"No. I am aware of the great power inside you. I can feel it, dormant but waiting to be released. Lord Krayt said that is what binds all you Skywalkers together, generation after generation. He says your ancestor Anakin was *made* by the Force, conceived by it, and that it flows through your blood like a torrent while for others it is at best a trickle." His voice got hungry. "Of all mortal beings you are the closest to the true power of the Force. There are many who envy that."

"I never asked for it."

"And yet you have it. You use it and it uses you in turn." Vorkan reached out with a three-fingered hand. When he touched her face he did it softly, not out any need to be gentle, she realized, but of something like reverence.

"Bringing you to Lord Krayt will be my proudest accomplishment," Vorkan said.

"You can try," Jade hissed. "You won't do it."

"I don't doubt your power. I don't doubt you could kill me here, rend me limb from limb, or spark the reactor on my ship and blow us both to atoms. Maybe you even *want* to do those things. Skywalkers are no stranger to the dark side."

She stared at him and tried hard not to hate.

"We have other assurances." Vorkan stepped back. She felt him reach out with the Force, signaling some other Sith who'd been waiting outside the chamber. They came in a moment later: two dark-robed humans with face marked red and black. They might have been twins. One used both arms

to cradle a Yuuzhan Vong seed pod the size of his torso. That surprised Jade, but only for a moment. Of course these Sith would have access to Yuuzhan Vong technology. They'd never have sabotaged the Ossus Project otherwise.

Vorkan opened the top of the seed pod, revealing a Vongformed creature with a flat body and a long, twitching tail tipped by a twisted barb. Jade's stomach clenched.

"This is called a spineray," Vorkan explained. "It is not merely a torture device. The pain it inflicts is so precise, the Yuuzhan Vong once used it to map the nerve structure in its victim's brain. And of course, all your Force powers do nothing to it."

The two humans reached carefully into the seed pod. One grabbed the twitching tail. The other took its head in two hands. They removed it from the pod and carried it around Jade. She twisted, tried to look behind her. She noticed the broad transparisteel window for the first time, the great churning molten lake and the tall vertical power vane that was silhouetted against the lava's scarlet glow.

Vorkan grabbed her face again, pulling it forward, untwisting her body. He grabbed hard this time and she could do nothing to jerk free. She felt the Sith behind her grab her shoulders, felt the pressure of the spineray as its pincer legs dug into her back, felt the new weight settle on her.

Then agony attacked her, not spectral but physical, the visceral kind that erased all conscious thought, even the Force. She opened her mouth to scream but was not aware if she succeeded. In an instant, agony was all.

Khat Lah did now know if the Sith were still searching for him, but none had pursued him during his climb up the power vane. He progressed slowly up the great machine, and by the time he reached the top his shoulders sang with agony and his arms ached like nothing he'd known.

He knew that if his grip faltered he would plunge into the fiery cauldron below. Even now Mustafar's brimstone smoke choked his lungs. Drifts of sparks and ashes wafted up from the lake on scalding breezes and pitted small stinging burns

against his skin. Yet he kept climbing; if he even flinched it would mean death.

A century ago his people had foresworn their worship of pain. Many still did so, in smaller ways, in secret, but as a member of the Ganner Sect, Khat Lah had consciously rejected the old masochism. As he climbed out of Mustafar's inferno he realized that pain could be a tool after all. It bound body and spirit together and drove away all confusion over his own motives. It purged him even of the burning anger over his comrades' deaths and the shame of his own complicity. He realized that none of those things mattered. *He* did not matter, not his shame, not his vain ambitions, not his honor, nothing. Even the wise old woman he fought to save didn't matter, nor the Sith who'd seized her. Against the endless march of eons and the will of the Force that commanded the universe, all of them were small.

Khat Lah realized that, surrendered to it, and found strength to push the pain away. Even if he could never feel it, the Force was part of him and he was part of the Force, and his every action played some small part in the whole of its will that defined all history, and even if its voice never whispered in his ear the power moved through him because it moved through everything.

That was enough. When he reached the summit of his climb, Khat Lah perched atop the tall vane and looked down at the broad observation window. The chamber was lit inside by a cool light, and he could see the figures moving inside: a tall thin creature colored black and gold, two shorter humans in red and black. The floor around them was littered with pieces of dismembered bodies, a grisly sight. They were gathered around a third figure suspended upside-down from the broad ceiling. It was small and pale, with long white hair falling down almost to the floor.

All he had to do was reach them.

Khat Lah examined the top portion of the power vane. He'd noted exposed cables on his climb up and carefully shimmied down five or six meters, following one all the way. He looked back at the window, judging distance and angle. Gripping the vane's metal surface with one hand, he

removed Nat Skywalker's lightsaber with the other. It felt strangely comfortable in his hand. He flicked on the golden blade long enough to cut the thick cable, then shut it off. He glanced back at the window and saw Jade Skywalker's body trembling in pain. The Sith had stepped back, watching her and probably enjoying it. It almost looked like they'd attached a spinneray to her back, but he could not be sure.

He climbed up two more meters, then prepared to grab the top section of the split cable. He judged distance and angle yet again and nodded to himself, satisfied. He grabbed the cable with one arm and held it close against his body. With the other hand, he gripped Nat Skywalker's lightsaber, thumb over trigger.

Once he got inside it would be him versus three Sith. Surprise would only get him so far. If he removed the spinneray, or whatever it was, it might free Jade Skywalker to help. Or perhaps not; perhaps she'd be dead by the time he reached her.

That was outside his control. Everything was outside of his control except the steps he took in the next few seconds. Though he surely swung to his death, Khat Lah found he did not fear, did not doubt. Though his whole body ached with strain, cuts, and burns, he felt joy in his heart for the part he'd been allowed to play in the universe's unending drama. Though it was small and futile, it had been his part and his alone.

Bearing his teeth in an almost human grin, Khat Lah pushed off from the power vane. He swung on the end of the cable, straight and true toward the transparisteel window. The Sith did not sense him, didn't look at him. A second before he hit, he stretched out his feet to catch the impact and ignited Nat Skywalker's golden blade.

His boots hit the pane first, then the blade. He sheared through the transparent metal with so-easy flicks of the wrist. He cut a flurry of strokes through it, shattering it in part, and fell through the hole. He held out his lightsaber so as not to cut himself as he impacted on the floor, came out of his roll, and found himself facing three stunned Sith with an amphistaff in one hand and a lightsaber in the other.

The tall gold-and-black alien screamed for the others to attack. By the time they plucked their sabers from their belts, Khat Lah was on the first one. With another flick of the lightsaber he cut the enemy down, but instead of fighting the second Khat Lah lunged past him to Jade Skywalker's trembling form. He lashed out with his amphistaff next; the living weapon sank its fangs into the spinneray's back and pulled it off the old woman. Her body jerked once more, then dangled limp from its binds.

She was still alive, Khat Lah knew it. He interposed Jade Skywalker between himself and the Sith; they balked at cutting through her and tried to circle around. The other red-skinned human was closer, and Khat Lah lashed out with his amphistaff again. This time it released the spinneray and sent the creature flying into the human's chest. The Sith howled in agony and fell kicking to the floor as the spinneray's barbed tail stabbed savagely into his stomach.

Then the golden Sith was on him. The tall alien moved with fluid grace; its three-jointed limbs gave it speed and flexibility unlike anything a human or Yuuzhan Vong could accomplice. It batted both Khat Lah's weapons away, and in the same fluid motion stabbed at his chest.

For the first time since his ascent up the power vane, Khat Lah felt fear. But fear, like pain, was a tool. It kept him alive as he jumped back from the Sith's lightning-fast thrusts, one after another. Khat Lah felt like he could anticipate the Sith's moves as he dodged and deflected, but even then it was impossible to actually land a blow on the creature.

He realized more Sith had joined them when a shocked voice barked, "Darth Vorkan! Where did he—"

"Just help you fools!" the gold and black Sith snapped.

Three Sith lunged toward Khat Lah in a swarm of red and black. Darth Vorkan slipped back, letting them attack. Even though they were three enemies, it was easier for Khat Lah to predict and counter their attacks. They swung high, he ducked low. They went for his legs, he jumped. One enemy swung too hard and left himself open; Khat Lah lashed out with his amphistaff and cut the Sith's throat without slowing down. As he battled the remaining two he felt like he was at

the center of a dance in which he knew every move better than his partners. He kicked one to the ground, smacked back the other's lightsaber with his own and stabbed him through with the amphistaff.

As he pulled out the amphistaff and turned to face the third opponent, the entire chamber shook. Everyone was thrown to his feet: Khat Lah, his opponent, Darth Vorkan, four more Sith who were just coming into the room. It was more violent than any groundquake Khat Lah had ever known, but it was more than a groundquake.

Khat Lah instinctively knew who was responsible. He looked at the small pale woman dangling upside-down by her feet. Her eyes were closed, her expression strangely serene as she called on the overwhelming power inside her and used it to churn the lake of fire over which they perched. She was luminous, as though summoning light from beneath her skin. He looked out the half-broken window and saw great waves of lava surging along the shoreline. He watched a wave jump out, crest, and smash against the factory's blue energy shields, which flickered in strain.

He knew that she was calling on all her power to destroy this factory, and the Sith with it. He knew, too, in a way he couldn't explain or fathom, that she was also calling out to her son to escape, and that Nat was refusing to leave her.

Khat Lah understood all this, and he was fine with it. He has come here ready to die. So long as he'd fulfilled his small role in the destiny of this galaxy, in the great will of the Force, he was happy.

Then he saw Darth Vorkan rear to his feet behind her. Kat Lah opened his mouth to scream. Then the scarlet Sith blade speared out from Jade Skywalker's chest and all her power stopped.

Sometimes Jade thought she knew more about death and sacrifice than any other Jedi. She'd seen it happen too early and too often. Her first teacher, Mjalu. Her father Ben. Jodram, whom she still loved. And her friend, who'd had other names but whom she only thought of as Wharn. Deep down she'd always wondered when her turn would come.

She'd hoped to die quietly, like Jaina or Allana, but there was no guarantee. Skywalker blood compelled people toward important lives, not peaceful ones.

She knew she was dying. Compared to the pain from the spineray, the burning hole Darth Vorkan had carved into her wasn't so bad. Under the right shoulder, through the lung, but missing the heart. She felt the Sith cut through the cables binding her to the ceiling, felt her body slam down on one shoulder to the hard metal floor. She saw Khat Lah bend over her and saw Vorkan loom over him, saber still blazing, with a sadistic gleam in his eyes. He wanted to savor this.

Jade had a few moments left. She opened her mouth but pain rushed through her chest, too much to speak through. She lifted one hand and touched Khat Lah's face. It was smooth, softer than she'd expected. His face contorted with grief, but she felt none herself.

There was one thing left to do, and only one. It was so simple.

Jade fell into the Force.

This had been so hard when she was young. She'd recoiled from the great power at the heart of the universe and the echoes it carried of her mother's dying agony. She'd come to understand those painful echoes had been the echoes inside her, amplified by a power so great it contained everything for every being: agony and joy, love and spite, peace and war and curiosity and hope and despair and every other tone in the vast spectrum of existence.

Living things could only experience a few colors at once; the full spectrum lay beyond a mortal's ability to see. In her dying moment Jade straddled the limits of life and the infinity of the Force, and in that union she felt everything, knew everything.

In that moment she could do anything, and so she called out.

Her call went *everywhere*.

As the warship *Krakana* limped away from Ord Lithone after a chaotic retreat, Kol Skywalker staggered and braced himself against a bulkhead. He felt his mother's presence,

familiar and warm and comforting like always, but tinged with melancholy farewell. Sadness gripped him, then confusion, and then Jade showed him everything.

The trap on Mustafar. The gold-and-black Blood Carver who'd killed her. And the revelation he'd been dreading most: Darth Krayt had survived and the Sith had engineered the entire war.

Jade tried to send comfort with the revelation, but she could only do so much. Kol collapsed on the deck, overwhelmed with the enormity of it all.

Farther outbound from Ord Lithone, tucked inside his battered stolen D-wing, a newly-made Sith Lord gasped. Raw Force-power greater than anything he'd ever felt seized him and filled him with knowledge.

He understood that a great Jedi was dying, and that the teacher he'd envied and hated was going to die with her. Understanding gave him no pleasure. Vorkan had taught him that one could only access the Force's true power through disciplined use of anger and hate. The power he felt was so great, so *calm*, and it surpassed everything he'd though possible. Perhaps, he thought with fear, the dark side was not all it was supposed to be.

Aboard an Alliance vessel stationed at Palanhi, Lowbacca tipped his head back and released a mournful howl heard throughout the ship.

On Coruscant, in his bed at the Jedi consulate, Arlen Fel was seized by a dream he knew to be real. He took in everything, understood everything, and passed bittersweet farewell to his first apprentice.

Roan Fel lifted his eyes and stared at the grey Bastion sky. Revelation came from nothing and consumed him. He was staggered by the dying call of Jade Skywalker and all it told him. The One Sith, which his father and brother had died to destroy, still lived, and its ancient master Darth Krayt had engineered this entire war. The Sith had used everyone to

achieve their vile ends: the Jedi, the Yuuzhan Vong, the Alliance and the Empire.

They'd used him most of all.

When he looked away from the clouds and saw the assembled Imperial Knights to whom he'd been speaking, Roan realize that they, too, felt it all.

And on her humble, homely freighter, Marin Solo dropped the hydrosponder she'd been using. Her legs went weak and her knees hit the deck. She hadn't felt this feeling in almost thirty years, and it took her seconds longer than most to understand what was happening.

Ania grabbed her arm and asked in a panicked voice what was wrong. Marin didn't know what to tell her.

Even as Jade's dying awareness spread across the vastness of space, she felt more firmly than anything the presence of her older son. She felt Nat fire the engines of his ship and blast through the hangar doors with his laser cannons. Though her vision dimmed and blurred she knew when he kicked his ship into a hover directly in front of the broad window and sent out another hail of laserfire.

It cut above her prone body and Khat Lah's bent form. It burned through Sith and tore open the rear walls, filling the air with debris and smoke. She felt dark minds wink out, one after another, while Nat's burned bright: frantic, scared, mourning.

She felt the one crouched beside her and knew that he, too, was luminous.

Without words, she told Khat Lah to go.

The Yuuzhan Vong understood. He rose, turned, and dashed for the blown-open window and the starship outside.

Jade didn't see him jump or join Nat aboard. She couldn't see anything anymore, but she could feel them both, frantic together. She felt, also, one Sith Lord stagger to his feet. Darth Vorkan was a dark star in the Force, blazing with anger and bounding toward Nat's ship, lightning-fast on long three-jointed legs. He had a lightsaber in hand and his heart was filled with vengeance.

He was nothing compared to her light. She told Nat to go. He pulled away. Then she reached back into the great lake of fire on which they sat. Her power became the fire's power, and it willed as she willed. When Darth Vorkan jumped out the window, the molten lake itself leaped up and consumed him.

In her final moment Jade Skywalker did what even her great-grandfather had not. She tamed the inferno's heart and made it her own.

Nat watched the great molten wave rise up from the lake. It crashed so hard against the factory that its flickering energy shields were overwhelmed and collapsed. Lava melted the durasteel face and dragged liquified metal down with it. Then came another wave, and another. Groundquakes joined the inferno to shake the factory at its foundations, and soon the entire structure collapsed on itself and slid in pieces into the hungry crimson lake.

Dimly, Nat perceived the lives of the last Sith wink out, drowned in Mustafar's undertow.

He barely noticed, barely cared. The warm light of his mother was gone, inside him and out.

Nat sat in the cockpit, feeling emptied, too tired to move until Khat Lah fell into the co-pilot's seat.

"We must go," the Yuuzhan Vong rasped.

Somehow Nat found the strength to say, "Where?"

"To Ossus. The other *Jeedai* must know all that had happened."

Nat had a feeling they already did, but there was nothing left for them here. He'd never flown a ship of this kind, but the Corellian controls were familiar enough. As they pushed out of Mustafar's atmosphere, Khat Lah said, "I am so sorry, *Jeedai* Skywalker. I tried to save your mother... but I could not. I am so sorry."

Nat knew that. The Yuuzhan Vong emanated aching regret.

"You did what you could." Nat didn't think he could say much else. He struggled to wrap his mind around the enormity of his failure, as a Jedi and a son. He didn't have any room left for Khat Lah's pain.

"I only learned under her for a short time... but she taught me things I am forever grateful for."

"I know." He wished the Yuuzhan Vong would stop talking, that he could be alone with his grief. "Just... patch a course in the hyperdrive."

"I do not know how."

Nat looked at Khat Lah. Of course he wouldn't know how. The Yuuzhan Vong's face was blank, but Nat could feel his embarrassment.

"I'll do it," Nat sighed. He bent over to the navigation console, froze, then looked back at Khat Lah.

It should have been impossible, but it wasn't. Shock broke everything, even grief. Nat felt his jaw hinge open.

He could feel this Yuuzhan Vong in the Force, as clear as any human.

"What is it, *Jeedai* Skywalker?" Khat Lah asked.

It was a long time before Nat figured out what to say.

Chapter Twenty

Since Admiral Lekhwash's assassination, rumor had spread as fast as panic across the Galactic Alliance navy. As captain of the Fifth Fleet's flagship, it was Jaius Yorub's duty to maintain order and morale aboard *Indomitable* and set the example for all other captains to follow. Frankly, he wanted nothing more than to tear off his uniform and go back to Sullust.

For years he'd promised himself he'd retire to the homeworld one day, settle in a comfortable warren, take some mates and breed some kits, just like he was supposed to. He'd miss the adventure and important work of the military, naturally, but it would be safer and less confusing.

It was hard to stomp down rumors when you yourself didn't know what was true or not. He'd managed to speak to *Krakana's* captain for five minutes but that hadn't clarified anything. He knew Kol Skywalker had been on *Krakana's* bridge when the supreme commander was killed, and they he'd apparently chased the assassin through to a hangar bay, where an explosive fight had killed over a dozen crewmen—though not Skywalker. Lekhwash had been shot in the head, but apparently the assassin had also wielded a lightsaber. That caused people to say that a rouge Jedi had done it, perhaps the rogue Jedi that had ruined the Ossus Project in the first place. *Krakana's* captain was no help in that and unfortunately neither were the Jedi. Skywalker had retreated to their headquarters Ossus, even though the triumvirate was apparently screaming for him to come to Coruscant. The

other Jedi serving in the Alliance fleet had locked themselves away in busy conferences, and nobody knew what that was about. There were none currently aboard *Indomitable* that Yorub could ask, but frankly, he had no desire to pry secrets from Force-users who could probably read all his thoughts without even asking. Jedi were damned useful in a fight but they could be damned frustrating, not to mention damned scary, in most other situations.

As a minor variation from previous crises, Admiral Stazi was not called away while Yorub scrambled to contain fallout in the Fifth. Instead the Duros was locked in his private office for over a standard day, rarely coming out and rebuffing Yorub's queries when he did.

The captain was sick of it all, but at least he could sleep. He'd passed command to his first officer, retired to his quarters, and changed into his nightclothes when the door buzzer ran three times in fast succession. He didn't need Force magic to know it was the admiral.

He opened the door and saluted in his pajamas. Stazi waved him at ease and stepped inside. The admiral wore the same blue uniform he'd had put on forty hours ago. Yorub's keen Sullustan nose picked up its stale smell.

"I'm sorry for my absence, Jaius, but I've had a lot to deal with," Stazi said. Despite not sleeping for over a day he looked itchy, restless. Too tense.

"What do you have for me, sir?"

Stazi sighed. "The triumvirate and defense council have finally agreed on a new supreme commander."

Yorub couldn't guess the choice from Stazi's tone. The admiral might have been unhappy he wasn't selected; he might have been unhappy he *was*. Stazi liked having one fleet he was total master of; managing a whole navy wasn't his style. "Who is it?"

"The triumvirs have selected Admiral Piers Petan."

Yorub's mouth creaked open, then he shut it. Frankly, he wasn't sure what to think. Petan was a competent administration and for most of the war he'd done just that, administrate. Lekhwash, Stazi, and to a lesser extent Slossar had commanded most of the actual fighting. From what

Yorub knew of Petan, he was strategically conservative and favored draining the Empire's resources through prolonged engagement.

"I was considered, if that's what you're wondering," said Stazi. "All the fleet admirals were. And the triumvirs were uncharacteristically frank. They said I had a propensity for recklessness and occasional problems with authority. Therefore, I was not a proper fit for managing our collective military assets." The admiral's smile was sour. "They weren't wrong."

"You had a good relationship with Admiral Lekhwash."

"I believe that may have counted against me."

"So this is a rejection of his strategy?"

"I have a hard time seeing it as anything else. In the triumvirate's view, Lekhwash was too bold. His gamble at Paqualis III could have easily gone the other way, and it ended up a costly win. And in their view, his reckless push at Ord Lithone may have gotten him killed."

"Some Force-using assassin got him killed. Have they looked into *that* bit?"

"They have. They've been in contact with the Jedi." Stazi took a heavy breath. "They say the *Sith* are responsible. Not just for the assassination but the despoiling of all those worlds and the entire war."

Yorub stared. "Do you believe that?"

"I'm not sure." Stazi sighed again.

"What kind of proof did they offer?"

"As I understand it, none. Only a personal guarantee from Kol Skywalker."

"That's *it*?" Yorub didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "They're asking us to take all this on faith? To trust their *feelings*?"

"It appears so."

"Well, what do they expect us to do now? If these Sith engineered the whole war, why don't we and the Empire team up and pound the rodders on, well, whatever planet Sith live on."

"That would be too simple. They also claim that the Sith are in league with the Empire."

"Well, that's damned convenient." Yorub crossed his arms. "No proof of that either, I'm sure."

"Not exactly, but they do have... compelling hearsay."

"What does that mean?"

Stazi gave him a grim look. "According to Skywalker, a team of Jedi were sent to the planet Mustafar, following a lead from a secret contact in the Empire. This was a trap. All but one of the Jedi was killed. Master Skywalker's mother was among the dead."

That halted Yorub's anger. It didn't go away, but it cooled to a simmer. "So you're telling me... the Empire's run by a bunch of murderous Force-using cultists. Didn't the emperor's dad and brother get *killed* fighting Sith?"

"I believe they did. If what the Jedi say is true, the situation in the Empire may be more complicated than we can imagine."

"If it is... what does that mean for us? I mean, aside from the one that killed Lekhwash, we haven't encountered any of these Sith things in battle. We'd know, wouldn't we?"

"I'm not sure. In the larger scope of the war, this revelation may change nothing. Or everything. I simply don't know. And those who do..." Stazi shrugged again.

Yorub hated it. He was a soldier; he was used to his fate being written by admirals and politicians. He didn't always like it, but he accepted it because it came with the job. Now his life, and the lives and deaths of the thousands of crewmen under his charge, were in the hands of mysterious beings he couldn't even comprehend.

More than ever he wanted to retreat back to the homeworld and burrow in a safe dark warren. But he was a soldier still, and that meant there'd see this war through to the end. He only hoped he'd be alive to see it.

When he bent his knee before Darth Krayt's old stone throne, there was no one else in the chamber to see it. Darth Vorkan was dead, Wyyrlok and Maladi elsewhere. This was not how he'd imagined his ascension to Sith Lord, but this was what he had and he still took pleasure from it.

"Rise," Krayt said from his throne. "Look at me."

He did. He met those fire-and-ice eyes firmly, proud in what he'd accomplished and eager to continue his growth in the Force. He wanted Krayt to know that.

"You are One Sith now," Krayt told him. "You were once Relik K'sharn, Nagai warlord. Then you became nothing, an empty vessel which needed be filled. What is your name now?"

He'd thought about this the whole time he'd been apprenticed to Vorkan. Sith Lords chose their names for many reasons, from many sources. Often they took them from the tongue of the ancient Sith. He'd considered many names over the past year and gradually settled on one. As a nothing, stripped of his name and past, he'd mastered greater power than he'd ever held as Relik K'sharn. As a Sith Lord he was a successor to that being, not the Nagai warlord.

"I am called Darth Nihl," he said, not asking the Dark Lord, but proclaiming.

"Very well, Lord Nihl." He caught a slight smile on Krayt's exposed lips. "I have decided that you will now become my Hand. My enforcer, the agent of my will and bane of all my enemies."

Nihl fought a frown. "I understood I was to become your Fist, your warleader."

"You would have made an excellent warleader, but I am in greater need of a Hand. As you know, that position is currently unoccupied."

He fought disappointment. While training under Vorkan he'd often felt envious of the Blood Carver, both for his Force-mastery and the esteem Darth Krayt held him in. Now he had succeeded in teacher in full.

"Are you not pleased with the honor?" asked Krayt.

"Of course I am. I am proud to serve the One Sith in all ways." Nihl swore to make it true. "What task do you have for your new Hand?"

"Something far simpler than your last one," Krayt said. "You are to lead a contingent of Sith to Bastion. Lady Maladi is already there, preparing for your arrival."

"Are we to kill Roan Fel?" The emperor and his Knights would be far harder to slay than one vermin admiral.

“Fel still has uses. As long as he is in command the Empire, the Jedi will be split on how to handle the war. Dethrone him, take his place, and we make ourselves a target for them.” Krayt chuckled. “Consider this assignment.... your victory parade.”

In her former life as the spy Morrigan Corde, she'd walked into many rooms having braced herself for death. As Kol had told her, surrendering the desire to live was sometimes necessary to reach greater goals. She was not self-sacrificing like a Jedi and never had been, and it had been decades since she'd anticipated death that way.

Death was a very real possibility now, from one hand or the other.

Nyna Calixte stepped into the conference room inside the Emperor's palace and halted one step in. On the side of the oval chamber closest to her were the rest of the Moff Council: Veed, Geist, Felhaur, Rus. Standing in the center were both the Emperor and Empress Fel, draped in silver and violet silks, looking as regal as Calixte had ever seen them. Fel had brought four of his Knights to the meeting, and Calixte recognized them as his most senior and trusted ones. Grey-bearded Treis Sinde, his cousin Mohrgan Valtor, and the horned Eshkar Niin all wore scarlet armor. His scarred and cybernetically-implanted brother-in-law Hogum Chalk was dressed in black.

Finally, standing at the far side of the chamber were six Sith.

Calixte's shock was genuine. She'd expected this conference to be about them. Her spies had picked up chatter among Imperial Knights indicated some Force-occurrence had alerted all of them to the dark siders' machinations. She'd never expected to see Darth Maladi standing three meters from the Emperor, nor for her to have five other Sith with her. Four had their faces marked in scarlet and black tattoos: a human, a Duro, a Gotal, and some race she couldn't place. The one standing beside Maladi was different. Jagged black marks gave his lower jaw a fearsome edge but the rest of his skin was totally white. He was tall, with broad muscular shoulders, a thin waist, and thick black hair. Not

quite human, but something else. A Nagai, perhaps. He had the predatory look she'd associated with that warrior race.

"Thank you for joining us, Moff Calixte." The emperor's voice was a low growl. His loathing for these Sith was palpable, as was his anger, though she had no idea it was directed at her.

"I apologize for my slight delay." Calixte sidestepped, placing herself next to Geist. "I was not aware we had such... unique guests."

"They arrived on Bastion a few hours ago," Fel said. "They claim they've come to help us." His hard gaze passed over the assembled moffs. "I'm sure you have heard of the Sith before."

Veed nodded. Geist twitched anxiously. Calixte sweated. Felhaur, cool under pressure like only a Chiss could be, said, "When the Empire last encountered the Sith, we did so as enemies."

"Yes." Fel turned to Maladi and snarled. "They killed my brother. Arranged for the assassination of my father. Before that they meddled in our affairs and tried to plant their own puppet as emperor. And now they come to us again... claiming they want to *help*."

The Devaronian woman smiled politely. "The Empire you rule is a Sith creation."

"And my family has done everything it could to erase Palpatine's stain."

"The Sith are no longer the Sith of Palpatine- or Darth Sidious, as we knew him." She gestured to the five beside her. "Once there were only two, always craving each other's power and sabotaging each other as much as they hurt the Jedi. Now we are many yet one, united in the goal of bringing security and justice to the galaxy."

"What exactly are you offering us?" asked Veed.

"The Empire is losing this war," Maladi said, eyes on Fel. "You've lost your greatest warship in a foolish blunder. Your supplies are running down. The emperor has refused to let his Imperial Knights fight on the front lines, while the Jedi have repeatedly turned battles in the Alliance's favor. It is almost as if your emperor *wants* to lose the war."

"How dare you!" Valtor put a hand on his lightsaber.

"He does not, of course," Maladi amended. "However, even he must admit that to salvage this war, let alone win it, a change of tactics is required."

"What kind of change?" asked Geist, clearly interested.

"You have already seen some of it." Maladi gestured to the white-and-black Nagai. "This is one of our newest initiates, Darth Nihl. At the Battle of Ord Lithone, it was he who infiltrated the enemy flagship, slew their supreme commander, and escaped after doing battle with the leader of the Jedi Council."

The moffs stared at Nihl, nakedly impressed. Even a few of the Knights' faces showed grudging respect. Calixte's spies had picked up many contradictory rumors about Lekhwash's assassination, many of which had included Kol. She'd expected a Sith hand but never expected to see the one who'd nearly killed her ex-husband. These damned dark siders had too many surprises.

"That is the power of a single Sith." Maladi smiled, clearly enjoying their expressions. "To unleash the collective power of *all* One Sith would turn this entire war."

"And place the Empire in your hands," Valtor snapped. Calixte had a feeling the emperor had designated his cousin to make the most impolitic statements.

"The Sith want to build an orderly, secure galaxy," said Maladi, still so smooth. "We cannot do it alone. The Empire brought order and security once and it can do so again. We are natural partners, and the galaxy clearly needs it."

"A question," Calixte said. "The Jedi claim the best way to end the war is to discover who truly ruined those hundred worlds. Have the Sith anything to say about that?"

Maladi's stare was hard. Calixte was adopting a hostile stance to keep up in Fel's graces; Maladi was smart enough to know that, but the insinuation in Calixte's tone was real. The best candidate for ruining the Ossus Project was in this room.

"We have not." The regret in Maladi's voice sounded authentic. "Discovering the truth behind that tragedy would require help from the Yuuzhan Vong, and as we all know

they are loyal to the Jedi. We seek to bring order using means to which we're best suited."

"Meaning what precisely?" asked Felhaur. "Will you be spies? Assassins? Will you fight on the front lines, as Jedi do?"

"We will do all of that, and more." Maladi spread her hands. "And like the Jedi, we will place ourselves at the disposal of the existing government."

"The Jedi and the Alliance don't always work perfectly together," said Rus.

"Naturally, different organizations will find clashes in culture when working together. I am confident they can be sorted out."

Maladi sounded like a business executive selling a merger. Calixte realized that was exactly what this was, a hostile takeover masquerading as a cordial partnership. The moffs were buying it. It gave Veed and Geist exactly what they wanted. As long as the Sith kept up the appearance of respecting Imperial law, Felhaur and Rus would accept their ruthless efficiency.

"You forget that the Sith see all others as vermin," Fel told his moffs. "We will be pawns to them, just like the Hapans were. If they fall, the Empire falls with them. If we outlive our usefulness or their favor, we fall too."

"Without us, the Empire will fall in weeks."

Maladi's statement brought Fel up short. For all his snarl and bluster and authentic anger, simply calling this meeting was an admission of weakness. An emperor secure in his power would have blown that Sith shuttle out of the sky and risked the consequences.

"The Empire is stronger than you think," Valtor warned.

"Are you? Even with their best admiral dead, the Alliance can grind you to nothing." Maladi gave a casual shrug. "Months, say, instead of weeks, but your end is coming. In another year all you'll have left are Bastion and a handful of surrounding sectors. The Alliance will be at its strongest point in a century, the Empire at its weakest, and *you*, Emperor Fel, will have to crawl on your knees begging Coruscant for mercy."

Fel stared at her with undisguised hate. Calixte half expected him to pull a lightsaber from his robes and strike her, but he did not.

To the moffs Maladi said, "You must make a decision soon, but I will not press you to choose now. We will return to our ship and return in two days to hear the result of your vote. I trust Imperial hospitality will hold for that long."

She stared at Fel as though begging him to strike. Physical violence was the last path to dominance he had left. Whether or not the Sith really had ruined the Ossus Project- and in her gut Calixte knew they had- they'd waited until the Empire was at its most desperate to reveal themselves. Brutal and effective, they were the saviors Veed and Geist had been dreaming of. More, the bulk of the Empire's citizens would welcome Force-using warriors who'd match the Jedi. In standing against them, Fel and his Knights would stand alone.

Standing alone did not make them wrong, but it made them bound to lose. Voice scraping, Fel said, "It will hold." It was his admission of defeat.

After the meeting in the council chamber, after the Emperor retreated to his private quarters and insisted he be left alone, Eshkar Niin found himself in the palace's long high corridors with the empress. It was his first time being alone with Elliah since his return from Mandalore. Just being beside her tore at him; when he looked at her profile, which he'd committed to fond memory decades ago, he saw with it the red visage of Darth Maladi and the jagged black-and-white scowl of Darth Nihil. They marked opposing poles of his life as an adept of the Force; the allure of light and the temptation of dark.

His past and his future, perhaps.

Even after he'd left Mandalore he'd told himself he'd committed to nothing. When he'd fed Maladi's information to the Emperor, who'd in turn fed it to the Jedi, he'd known intellectually that he'd be sending other Force-users to their deaths. Those were not Imperial Knights, though, only feckless Jedi who'd drawn the galaxy into bloody war through their naïve idealism. It had made it easier to rationalize his actions.

Now the full truth of things was clear. Because of him Jade Skywalker, one of the most powerful and distinguished Force-users in the galaxy, was dead. The emperor was visibly stricken by the loss; though he'd never been close to the woman they were still family, sharing the prized and powerful blood of Anakin Skywalker. The Jedi were grief-stricken and outraged. They would never trust the word of an Imperial Knight again and would never form a pact with Fel against the Sith. It had been a brilliant stroke, and though he'd been used as a pawn Niin couldn't help but admire the genius of it.

And, he admitted to himself, he admired the Sith themselves for their intricate plotting and brutal effectiveness. They really could turn the war. They were the Empire's final hope.

"I don't know if we can stop them now, Eshkar," Elliah said.

Her voice, soft and thoughtful, drew him to the opposite pole, the one from which he'd came, the one that swore fealty to the emperor and the light side, to honor and justice and benevolent rule. He looked at her familiar, beautiful face and saw her struggling to hold in tears.

"Majesty," he said, "Even if the moffs do vote to use the Sith—"

"*When*," she corrected.

"The Sith are few. They can't wrest control of the entire Empire."

"Oh, yes they can. They controlled Hapes from the shadows for forty years. None of us had any idea until it was too late. They are ruthless and they are *devious*. They can make you do their will when you don't even know it."

Niin understand better than she could possibly know. "Then we should use *them*," he said. "Let them fight our battles and turn the tide. And when we have the advantage again, we purge the Sith, violently, like they purged the Jedi at the end of the Clone Wars."

Elliah blinked her eyes clear and turn them on Niin. "The emperor is planning that right now, but the Sith will expect

that. Roan will need to rely on his most capable, most trusted Knights to outsmart them.”

Niin wavered. “I’m not sure I quality any longer. It’s because of me the Jedi died on Mustafar.”

“You only found the information Roan asked you to.” She squeezed his hand. “You had no way of knowing they would walk into a nest of Sith.”

“Then the emperor wants my help, still?”

“He told me so.”

Niin felt himself torn even more between those poles: Empire and Sith, light and dark, love and power.

“I’m glad,” he lied.

“We need you, Eshkar,” she said. “Now more than ever.”

The pain was too great. He withdrew his hand from hers and quietly excused himself.

As a child, the only place on Ossus Kol had liked was the greenhouse inside the Jedi Temple. Its lush verdure had been a welcome contrast to the arid desert outside. When he’d gone to Zonama Sekot the whole world had seemed like that greenhouse, a miracle full of life. He’d been a little lonely at first, but had found companionship in Nei Rin and learned much under his mentor Jaina.

Her death, all for his sake, had been painful, but then Nat and his mother had come to Zonama Sekot, and they’d lived together and grown together for years after that.

Even as a child, he’d known they were the happiest years of his life. Nothing since then had quite compared. Once, during the good days at the start of the Ossus Project, Nei Rin had suggested that he yearned to make all hundred worlds into gardens in imitation of the one he’d known as a child.

As he stood in the lush temple greenhouse, looking out on a verdant landscape beyond the window, that memory brought only pain. Since the loss of his mother almost everything did. At the start of this war he’d clung to some hope that he might discover the true despoilers of those worlds and, in bringing them to justice, salvage the dreams for peace and unity that had led the galaxy to this point.

Instead revelation had been the greatest disaster of all.

It had been hard to face anyone since his mother's death. He'd had perfunctory meetings with the Council, and with difficulty he'd comforted Cade. He'd had sporadic conversations with Alliance personnel on Coruscant but they were angrily pressing him to come in person and continue directing a war that was so different from what Kol had thought.

He'd barely talked to Nat at all. He could feel the anguish and guilt from his brother, but had nothing to comfort him with. The one Yuuzhan Vong who'd survived the mission to Mustafar had avoided Kol entirely. Apparently Khat Lah had ensconced himself with Nei Rin and rejected contact with all Jedi.

Kol felt his brother approaching but did not turn to see Nat emerge along the greenhouse path. He waited until Nat stood beside him to glance sidelong. His older brother's eyes were weighted beneath heavy bags. His long hair was more tangled than usual and there seemed fresh gray in his beard. Kol looked away in a flush of embarrassment.

"I came to tell you I'm sorry," Nat said.

"Don't. Please. What happened... The Sith did that. And the Imperials. *They* set the trap."

"I know. But that's not what I wanted to talk about." Nat breathed in, breathed out. "I can't do this anymore, Kol. This Jedi thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I mean, kid brother. You and mom... you were natural Jedi. Heirs to the Skywalker tradition. Me, though..."

"You have *always* been a great Jedi. Greater than you know." He turned and squeezed Nat's shoulder. His brother had taken out his lightsaber and was holding it in both palms, shifting it with his fingers.

"If I were a great and natural Jedi... things on Mustafar would have turned out different."

"Nat—"

"Don't interrupt me," he said, suddenly harsh. "I need to get this out. You can tell me that it wasn't my fault. Every-

one else has. Maybe you're even right. But I'm never gonna believe that. So I'm done. I've gotta walk away."

Kol fought the urge to argue. "What will you do?"

"I already talked to Droo about it. I think I could move in with her, get married, adopt her kits. They don't know I'm a Jedi so I think I might try... a normal life. I've seen it done before." He tapped the lightsaber against his palm. That had been Marin Solo's once. After leaving the Order she'd passed it on to Nat. Apparently she'd passed on other things, probably without meaning to.

"I just need to step away," Nat said. "I can still... help, sometimes. With the war. In little ways."

"We need help now more than ever."

"Yeah. I know. But I can't help the way I used to. That... that did more harm than good." Nat slapped the saber in his palm one more time, hard, then held the weapon out to Kol. "Give this to somebody else. That Vong who went after Mom on Mustafar... He did pretty good with it. You'll want to talk to him, Kol."

"I heard he hasn't left Nei Rin's damutek in days."

"Well, you should give him this when he comes out."

Kol pressed the lightsaber into Nat's palm. "Keep it. You're still a Jedi, even if you don't think so. You're still my brother and you'll always be a Skywalker."

He held Marin's lightsaber up, considering. "You saying this is part of my destiny or something?"

"It's not my place to say. It's not yours either."

Nat shook his head. "I know. Makes me hate the Force sometimes."

"Do you plan to stop using it entirely?"

He considered. "Don't know. If I have to use it to protect people I care for, then I will."

That heartened Kol just a little. "Then keep it."

A labored sigh. "Fine. Always had a hard time turning down my kid brother." He stuffed it into a pocket. "But listen, Kol. Destiny's not everything either. Even if you sometimes think it is."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning... take care of yourself. That's all I'm asking."

“I will. And *if* you decide to come back...”

“You’ll be waiting, I know.”

Nat touched his shoulder and pulled Kol in for a hug. It was a tight, warm, brotherly embrace, but when they separated Kol felt a chill. He watch Nat turn his back and disappear among the brush and palm-fronds, and when he was gone he closed his eyes and tried to feel the embrace of living things all around him, to comfort himself with their harmony in the Force.

The life was there, and so was the harmony, but Kol could not find a way to join them. He had never felt so much an island.

PART III



ASHES AND DUST

Chapter Twenty-One

It was mid-morning in Setair, one of a dozen mid-sized towns on the fringes of Chalacta's equatorial desert. The streets were an organic tangle of wide lanes and narrow alleys, the squat buildings mostly yellow mudbrick. Despite its primitive appearance it was a clean city, and artfully placed public gardens, lushly irrigated by underground aquifers, bespoke the Chalactan peoples' reputation for grace and harmony.

As she stood in the shadow of a tall palm and watched activity on the street, Marin Solo thought harmony was notably lacking. She didn't need the Force to tell her that. She could see it in peoples' hurried walk, the way they avoided eachothers' eyes and cast quick sideways glances. Every once in a while, a squadron of Imperial stormtroopers marched down the street, white armor clouded by patches of yellow dust.

The entire sector had gone over to the Empire two weeks ago. Most worlds hadn't even put up a fight. Chalacta was a generally quiet planet, without huge population centers or vital resources, but the Imperials were still making their presence felt. They'd done nothing heinous here, or on any of the thousands of systems they'd gained since the start of the war. Roan Fel had repeatedly guaranteed that newly-Imperial worlds would be treated justly, with a good degree of autonomy. It was because he'd kept that promise that planet after planet, Chalacata included, had surrendered with minimal fight or outright switched sides.

But the Empire was in league with Sith. Marin still didn't understand the whole of it, or how deeply her cousin was connected with them, but it meant that sooner or later, the autonomy and just treatment would be replaced with iron-fisted brutality. It had happened in Hapes, and it would happen in the Empire.

And because the Sith were involved, it meant that no Jedi was safe on an Imperial-aligned world. Two knights and two apprentices had been on Chalacta when the Empire had seized control and they needed extraction. Sending more Jedi into occupied territory was dangerous and spread their numbers even thinner.

That was why Marin Solo and her people were here instead. After the latest stormtrooper squadron passed by, she felt a buzz in her pocket and plucked out her comlink. Turning away from the street, so the cowl of her hood obscured her lips, she said, "Go ahead."

"Bantha here," came the gruff voice she'd expected. "What's your status?"

"Taking a break in one of the gardens. Do you have anything on their location?"

"I think so."

She glanced back at the street. No Imperials in sight. "Where are they?"

"I think they're inside an apartment block, ten stories high, about seven hundred meters due south of the port."

"I know it." Marin had spent almost a full day exploring Seitar on foot and she had a pretty good mental map drawn up. This city didn't have many ten-storey apartment blocks either. "Do you know where, specifically?"

"No. I'm just going on a feeling."

Marin remembered those, dimly. "How are you getting in?"

"I was thinking the front door. It's just a residential block. They don't have much for security."

"I'll camp outside and watch your back." She was already on the move, walking into the flow of pedestrian traffic. "I'm about twenty minutes away. Is there a good rooftop or something I can spot from?"

"There's a speeder repair garage across the street from the entrance. You can probably get on top of that and lay low."

"Sounds good. Wait until I'm close before you go in. Do *they* know you're coming?"

"I'm not sure. I'll try to warn them again."

"Good. I'll make sure our ride's standing by, in case we need to make a hard extraction."

"Understood. Bantha, out."

Marin turned off the comlink and made her way through the streets at a brisk but casual pace. She spotted the apartment block clearly and had to come around to the south side the building to spot the slightly shabby outdoor entry plaza. She gave it only the briefest glance and kept walking, past the apartment and past the speeder garage which was currently open for business. A Xextro was currently giving some SoroSuub speeder a four-handed wax job and somebody else was working further inside.

Marin slowed her pace and did her best to look casual as she circled to the rear of the garage. As she'd hoped, there was a series of metal ladder-rungs that she used to clamber up to the rooftop.

She stepped carefully over the sun-bright metal surface, avoiding the glass panels that let atrium light into the garage below. She found a spot at the roof's forward edge that had good cover and lay down on her stomach. She could see most of the street below, the apartment block entrance and the entry plaza. A few beings, presumably residents, loitered on its edges, and she spotted her cousin standing beneath a tree in the center, drinking some bottled beverage.

It had been two years since Nat Skywalker had left the Jedi Order. He seemed to have aged ten. He'd put on weight, and his sandy-blond hair had tipped decidedly toward gray. More, it was the look in his eyes. Nowadays Marin had a hard time remembering the charmingly enthusiastic teenager who'd hero-worshipped his Jedi ranger cousin. He was as far gone as that Jedi ranger.

Though he'd left the Jedi, desperate times had prevented him from walking away entirely. Marin knew that all too well. After the Sith revealed their presence the war had

tipped drastically in the Empire's favor. Jedi still served on the front lines, but they could only do so much against the subterfuge and ferocity of the Sith, who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once. As the situation worsened and the Alliance lost sector after sector, conscience had gotten to Nat and Marin both. Now they were doing what they could to help.

Lying flat on the roof she took out her comlink and said, "I'm in position. You know where they are?"

"I think so. I'm going in."

"I've got your back."

She watched as Nat pushed off the tree, threw his bottle in a rubbish can, and casually walked into the building. She made a brief call updating the rest of the team, then settled herself in to wait.

This apartment block wasn't a dump exactly, but it clearly wasn't Setair's most desired real estate. The carpet in the hallways hadn't been washed in years, the walls needed a paint job, and every so often an overhead light would flicker out. At least there weren't pests running around.

Thankfully, he knew exactly where he was going. While waiting for Marin to catch up he'd touched the hiding Jedi in the Force. One of the Knights had touched him back, conveying that they were holed up in an apartment on the sixth floor. It had required minimal Force suggestion to get past the bored Chalactan working the front desk, and from there, hopefully looking like any other resident, he'd taken the turbolift up six levels.

He touched the Jedi in the Force once more, telling them that he was near. He didn't know any of these Jedi personally, but they'd been able to sense each other's intentions clearly. That connection was a line he reeled himself in with, following its pull around one corner, down a hall, and finally to a locked-tight door.

He gave the empty corridor another look and rapped his knuckles.

Ten seconds later the door opened, but only a few centimeters. The stripe of a face peered at him through the gap,

then disappeared. The door opened further and he let himself inside.

There were six total beings in the room. Two were local Chalactans, dark-skinned near-humans, both on the far side of middle age. The other four were clearly the Jedi. He marked the knights as one bald human and an Oolid male, while the apprentices were a young blue-skinned Mon Calamari and a teenage Zabrak woman. The young ones were only a year or two past his nephew Cade; the thought made a twist in his stomach.

"Thank you so much for coming for us," the human said. "I wasn't expecting to be rescued by *you*, Jedi Skywalker."

"I'm just Bantha now. Bantha Rawk." He had to remind himself sometimes, too.

"Of course," the man said apologetically, then went through quick introductions. He was Gen Konar and his fellow knight was Vett Grolik. The apprentices were named Omwrak and Soht Lenar. The two Chalactans had volunteered their apartment to shelter the Jedi, but their expressions were apprehensive. Through the Force, Bantha sensed anxiety but not duplicity. They'd been brave enough to help the fugitives but were still hoping to send the Jedi off and go back to their safe normal lives. As far as he was concerned, that was good enough. Most of the galaxy wanted nothing to do with Jedi these days.

"We haven't left this apartment for two weeks," Grolik explained. "No one's come looking for us this whole time."

"Do the Imperials know you're here?"

"The Chalactan government knew we were on-planet when they surrendered. We can assume they've told the Imps, but we were working in Harkar, the big city up north. They shouldn't know we're in Setair."

"No, but they'll be looking everything. There's storm-trooper patrols in town."

"We know," said Omwrak. The apprentice's voice trembled a little.

"Do you have a ship to get us out of here?" asked Lenar.

"That's right. She's using civvie codes. We flew it right in and should be able to fly right out."

"Are there Imperial ships in orbit?" asked Konar.

"One frigate with TIEs flying patrol. Plus the local militia. But don't worry. Our ride out of here can punch hard if it has to."

Bantha was less worried about that part than getting these Jedi to the ship. Setair didn't get a lot of off-worlders, and while mainline humans didn't draw stares here, a water-starved Mon Cal and a big hairy Oolid would, especially travelling in conjunction. If they split the group in two it would make things a little easier. He could have Marin escort two of them to the ship. He could wait an hour and take the others after them. It was far from a perfect plan, but if he took everyone out at once somebody would notice and tip off the Imperials.

He was just starting to explain the plan when his comlink buzzed. With a sinking feeling he brought it to his mouth and whispered, "Bantha here."

"You've got company," Marin said. "A squad of stormies just rolled into the front yard."

He hated being right. "Are they inside the building yet?"

"They will be in a couple seconds. Full dozen. Half of 'em are going for the door, the others are camping in the plaza."

Bantha realized in an instant that trying to be subtle or sneaky would get them killed. Their best chance of survival was to get out of here as fast and hard as they could. If their ride couldn't punch as hard as he'd just bragged they were dead.

If he got himself killed like this, well, Droo would kill him a second time.

"Do what you can to stall 'em," Bantha said. "And tell the extraction team to come right away."

"My thoughts exactly. Hang tight. I'll do what I can."

Bantha shut off the comlink. The rest of the room had heard everything, of course, and they stared at him as if waiting for instruction.

"We need to be ready," he told them. "We're going to have to go out the windows. Clear out space around them. Barri-cade the front door if you can."

The Jedi burst into motion, moving quick and nimbly around the terrified and frozen Chalactan couple whose world had just come down around them. Bantha felt their raw fear in the Force, and the admirable concentration of the Jedi. He felt something else too, something dark and fleeting, and when he tried to examine it closer it was gone.

Then he wondered if a dozen stormtroopers was all they were dealing with.

With the first stormies pressing in through the apartment's front door, there wasn't time to hesitate or do anything with finesse. Having a Jedi for a father and a Mandalorian for a mother had mostly made for a schizoid upbringing, but one thing both Marin's parents had stressed was the importance of always being prepared. Therefore, right after her call to Nat ended, she stood up on the edge of the garage roof, reached into her cloak, and pulled out the smoke grenade tucked inside. She used all her arm strength to hurl the thing over the street and into the apartment courtyard, where it burst with a loud, satisfying pop and spilled a cloud of expanding dark-gray smoke. It was harmless but would muck up the stormies' vision and hopefully draw the ones who'd gone inside back out.

She had no more than a minute before the smoke cleared, so she brought out her concealed pistol and began shooting. It was as hard for her to see the stormies as for them to see her, but she'd mentally marked out their locations and did her best to direct shots into the right points of the smoke-cloud. She only got four blasts out before the stormies started shooting back, but they were only aiming blindly in her general direction. Marin dropped to her stomach, shielding herself as much as possible behind the roof's rim, and kept firing.

With her free hand she pulled out her comlink and switched to the extraction team's frequency. Over the rapid tang of laserfire she called, "Hey, Mom? I think we need a ride."

The apartment in which they hid was on the side of the building the opposite the courtyard, but the sound of laserfire

was still clear and loud enough to obscure the footfalls of the stormtroopers charging the door. The Force gave the Jedi all the warning they needed, and when the troopers attempted to force open the door they found its mechanisms jammed and immobile. That wouldn't stall them for long, but in the tense seconds between the grinding of the door and their explosive entry, Bantha's ears picked up the steady, loudening whine of familiar starship engines.

Then the door exploded, and it was deafening. Smoke gushed into the room, but the Jedi used the Force to flush it back into the stormtroopers' faces. They'd thrown up a barricade of tables and turned-over sofas, creating a low wall of furniture that bisected the room. It wouldn't give much cover against stormtroopers' blaster rifles, but they'd still have to clamber over it.

There were only four troopers, but they pushed into the room with rifles blazing. Bantha's gold lightsaber sprung up in his hand and using it felt easy and natural as he batted back laser bolts alongside Konar and Grolik. The apprentices and the apartments' owners huddled in the back by windows whose glass was quickly shattered by laserfire.

The broken windows made it easier to hear the approaching engine-whine turn into a roar, and he had no doubt his rescuers could easily find their location. He felt a hot gust of air take his back and knew help had arrived.

"Get down!" Bantha shouted, and he dropped to his knees.

Konar and Grolik did as well, and right on time a volley of laserfire cut in from behind them, skimmed above their heads, and riddled the two nearest stormtroopers with black scorchmarks.

Bantha looked over his shoulder. The padawans and the Chalactan couple were clambering through the window. Three figures in Mandalorian armor hung on the exterior, boots on the windowsill with blasters in one hand and fiberchord cables gripped tight in the other. The cables swung up to the aged and heavily modified light freighter *Bottom Line*, which hovered on repulsors so close to the apartment its flank nearly tapped the next window up.

The other two stormies ducked back, taking cover in the hallway. The apprentices clung to one Mando, the old couple another, and all six were reeled up toward the *Bottom Line*'s open landing ramp.

The Mandalorian still in the window, a big man in black armor with a white Mythosaur stamped on the face, waved for the Jedi to fall back and join him. Bantha stayed where he was, deflecting a fresh volley from the stormies, but Grolik got to his feet and moved for the window.

The Mando and his hairy Jedi partner were swinging back up when the stormtroopers ducked into the hall yet again. Using the brief respite to glance over his shoulder, Bantha saw the two large figures pulled inside the ship. If he had to, he could probably do a Force-assisted jump out the window, but he'd much rather one of those Mandos come back with a fiberchord so he could swing.

Then he heard a new, familiar sound: the snap, hiss, and hum of an igniting lightsaber. The figure that charged into the apartment wore standard white armor, but he clutched a blazing red saber in two hands. His helmet was off, revealing a human face covered in jagged red and black tattoos.

In the heat of battle Bantha had forgotten his earlier premonition. Surprise slowed his reaction and it slowed Konar's too. The Sith- he must have been secreted as part of the stormie squad- jumped over the blaster-scorched barricade and slammed his boots into Konar's chest. The Jedi fell back, leaving only Bantha to fight off the Sith. The bastard was fast, fierce, and at least twenty years younger than his opponent. Bantha knew instantly this was a fight he would lose.

Help came as another volley of laserfire through the window. The Sith jumped back from Bantha and hefted his saber to block the Mandalorians' fire. The first two had swung back to the window, and as Bantha dashed for his exit he used the Force to help Konar to his feet and push him toward the Mandos.

Konar and his partner swung back to the ship first. Bantha hauled himself into the window and grabbed the Mando around the armored waist just as the Sith made one last

charge. Bantha and his rescuer kicked off, swinging through the open air, but the Sith leaped after them. His Force-lengthened arc would collide with theirs, but Bantha had enough Force of his own to push the Sith back. His white-armored body smacked against the side of the apartment block, but he managed to grab hard onto the windowsill before he fell six storeys to the ground.

Bantha and his rescuer were pulled up onto the *Bottom Line*'s landing ramp, and as soon as their backs slammed onto the hard metal the Mando shouted, "We're in! Take us out!"

The ship's pilot immediately complied. Wind howled in Bantha's face as he scrambled up the ramp and into the hold where the rescued Jedi huddled, then staggered toward the cockpit.

Setair's sand-colored cityscape swung dizzily outside the forward viewport. He thought he spotted a few dark shapes hanging in the sky ahead, maybe inbound starfighters, and he grasped the back of the pilot's seat hard.

"We need to get out of here, fast."

"Oh, you think?" Jind Skirata grunted. "One more thing to do first."

"What?"

"What do you *shabla* think we're doing?" snapped the old woman in the co-pilot's spot. "We're getting my daughter."

A second stormie squad had arrived to shore up the first, and Marin was well and truly pinned down by the time the *Bottom Line* swept up alongside the apartment block to pick up its passengers. From this angle Marin couldn't see what was happening, and anyway she was too busy hiding and sometimes shooting at the stormtroopers who'd surrounded the garage.

When her uncle's ship swung around and veered toward her position, she was ready. The *Bottom Line*'s ventral quad-lasers sprayed fire at the ground, distracting the stormies. The freighter stopped over the garage, dropped low, and Marin sprinted and jumped onto the ramp. The ship surged upward as soon as her boots hit metal and she immediately

lost balance. If the ramp hadn't pulled up and shut tight, she'd have tumbled out into the sky. Instead she lay on the deck, sweating and panting for a moment before she pushed herself upright and made for the cockpit.

The ship was jerking around violently and she knew they were being pursued. Not that surprising; she braced herself with both hands to the wall all the way to the cockpit, and her first sight through the viewport was a starfield marked by green lasers flashing in from behind.

"*Buir*, you in the top turret yet?" Jind called on the ship's internal comm.

"I'm here," Mekr's scratchy voice replied. "Got three more comin' behind us."

"We'll be clear for lightspeed in three minutes."

Mekr's reply was a short chain of profanity. Marin dropped into the seat behind Jind's and looked at Nat in the chair beside hers. Her cousin's face was set in hard concentration as he watched the lancing laserfire and the stars that shifted as Jind twirled them through evasive maneuvers.

Marin's mother, strapped in the co-pilot's spot, announced, "We've got a course patched in."

"Great," said Jind, "Just let me clear this *shabla* gravity well..."

He threw the ship into a few more twists, until Tamar announced, "We're clear! Do you have my heading?"

"Setting it now." Jind's hands danced on the controls, then reached out, grabbed the lever at the center of the console, and pulled it back. Stars exploded into streams of light as the *Bottom Line* catapulted into hyperspace.

Marin and Nat released simultaneous breaths of relief. Jind, leaning back in his chair, eyed them and asked, "Are we good or what?"

"I'd say you're worth the money," Marin agreed.

"Good to know, since it *is* your money."

Which was true, to an extent. Most of the Jedi Order's financial assets had been moved to secret accounts in the beginning of the war. Marin had been managing those with the help of the Calrissians, and while a good chunk of those funds had gone to constructing the hidden temple on Taivas,

the leftovers were being used to fund secret ops like extraction from behind enemy lines. Marin was all too happy to throw some of that business to her family. Over the past two years Yaga Auchs had only tightened his rule on Mandalore, and the Skirata clan was effectively blacklisted from working with other Mandos.

Jind pushed out of his seat and made for the exit. "I'm gonna go check on my *buir*. Make sure he didn't break anything. Whoops, 'scuse me, *jeti*."

Jind turned sideways to slip past a big, furry Oolid who was standing in the portal. "Thank you for your assistance," the Jedi told Jind, most sincerely.

"Just doing my job," the Mandalorian shrugged and sauntered down the hall.

The Oolid looked at the ones left in the cockpit. His eyes lingered on Nat, no surprise there. That the brother of the leader of the Jedi Council had walked out on the Order in the middle of the war was no small thing. Whatever they thought of his decision, none of the Jedi they'd been rescuing for the past year had been anything but grateful for the save.

If those Jedi had any idea who Marin was or what she'd once been, none had ever given a hint. She was glad for that, and knew Nat would have preferred to be similarly anonymous, but unfortunately that just wasn't possible.

"We can't thank you enough," the Oolid said. "For a Sith to have been in Setair, searching for us... Our time was running out, and we didn't even know."

"A Sith?" Marin blinked.

Nat nodded grimly. "Dressed up in stormtrooper armor. Probably acted as squad leader."

"Stang. That's a new trick."

"Well, they've always been sneaky." Nat's face set into a scowl. He asked the Oolid, "How are the others?"

"Minor injuries. They will be fine. They also wonder where we are going."

"I guess you haven't heard much news the past couple weeks," Nat sighed. "This whole sector is Imp territory now. They've got the whole Perlemian under control and they're making a push into the Core."

"Then where *are* we going?"

"Kashyyyk," Marin supplied. "The Third Fleet's been cut off from the rest of Alliance territory but they've fortified all of Wookiee space. There's other Jedi there."

"The Wookiees remember the last time the Empire came after their planet, literally." Nat added. "A lot of them were *alive* when Palpatine torched their forests and enslaved them. They're not going to meekly throw in with the Imps."

"It is good to see someone still has resolve. I'd like to hear more, if you would." The Oolid waved down the hall, toward the hold. "We all would."

Marin caught Nat's reluctant expression, but her cousin agreed and left the cockpit with the Jedi, leaving her alone with her mother.

With a sigh, she moved up to the pilot's seat. She'd been around a lot of different ships and spent a lot of time in this one over the years, but she'd never actually flown it. Mekk and Jind would tear her head off if she so much as scratched the thing.

"It's good we all got out," Tamar said beside her, "But that could have gone better."

"You're telling me," Marin laughed dryly. "I'm getting too old for this, Mom."

"*I'm* the one who should be saying that."

"You weren't stuck on top of a garage getting shot at by stormies."

"Fair enough."

Marin said nothing else. She stared forward at hyperspace's light-show and tried to remember how many hours to Kashyyyk. Wookiees were loyal and resilient, and it was as safe as any place could be for the Jedi right now, but the list of safe worlds shrank by the day. Marin wasn't a Jedi and she'd spent most of her life trying to have nothing to do with them at all. And then, against her will each time, she'd been drawn deeper and deeper back into it. Benet and Ania were on *Fast Start*, far from here, doing cargo runs along the routes free from conflict, but that list was getting shorter too. It felt like everything- the life she'd had and fled from, the life she'd made- was being squeezed by the same vise.

Marin shifted uncomfortably in her seat and asked, “Have you ever noticed how when there’s a crisis, you end up forced to do the right thing, even when you really don’t want to?”

“Daughter, that is the story of my life.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

The battle for the Rendili shipyards, one of the greatest conflagrations of the war, was reduced to an array of multi-colored lights projected in the center of the war room of the emperor's palace on Bastion. Holo-markers danced around each other like slow-motion luminous flitgnats, and the sight might have been soothing to someone ignorant of all it represented.

Sometimes it seemed to Roan Fel that he'd spent the past three years staring at tactical displays of far-off battles. At the very start, during the abortive attack on Ossus, he'd stood in this very room with nearly all his senior admirals and advisors beside him. The crowd had thinned and changed composition. Supreme Commander Kaylac and Intelligence Director Seniac had been replaced, grudgingly, with Morlish Veed and Nyna Calixte, and the former was currently with his fleet at Bilbringi. All the other fleet admirals were far from Bastion, waging campaigns in the Mid Rim, the Colonies, even the border to the Core. They battled the Alliance fiercely in all those zones, pressing closer and closer toward Coruscant.

The past two years had marked a stunning reversal in the Empire's fortunes. The Sith were as capable as advertised. Their spies uncovered intelligence Calixte's could not. Their warriors led attacks, performed assassinations, and hunted Jedi. They'd been more than sufficient to counter the Alliance's previous advance where Force-users were concerned. Amongst the worlds of the Empire, and many ex-

Alliance planets that had refused to fight a war on behalf of the Vong, the Sith were being seen as heroes, all their past crimes forgiven.

Just thinking on that made Roan's throat clench in rage. He held that rage close to himself, never letting it overtake him but never letting go. He needed to remember that rage and the truth it spoke to.

This had become two wars, one within and one without.

Roan looked through the field of drifting multi-colored lights at the Devaronian woman standing on the opposite side of the table. Darth Maladi had become a permanent guest on Bastion. It was from here that she coordinated Sith activities throughout the galaxy. Her spies had uncovered critical intelligence suggesting the Alliance-affiliated shipyards at Rendili would be undermanned for a brief window of time, and so Roan had ordered the attack. She watched her handiwork with cool detachment.

Calixte's people had met with Rendili officials in secret and guaranteed that the planetary government would be perfectly happy to lend its services to the Imperials, so long as they kept getting paid. The Alliance was still doing everything in its power to prevent that, but Admiral Rulf Yage's ships had caught them off-guard. The battle had tipped early in the Empire's favor, and the Alliance had switched priorities from defending the shipyards to denying them for the Imperials. Mon Cal cruisers turned their guns on the very docks that had repaired them these last three years, shredding durasteel superstructure and choking Rendili's orbit with debris. The Alliance did not fall out lightly with its old friends. As Calixte had already said, it was sound tactics on their part, but would look good in Imperial propaganda holos.

Admiral Yage acted quickly to limit the damage, and the fight was finally winding down as Alliance ships slipped into hyperspace. Yage did little to stop them. When the last Mon Cal cruisers were jumping out of the system, Yage initiated a direct communication with Bastion.

"As you can see, the last Alliance ships are withdrawing," the blunt-faced man said.

“Excellent work, Admiral,” Roan told him. “Do you have a preliminary evaluation of the shipyards?”

“As an estimate, I believe between fifty to sixty percent of the facilities are still operable.”

Roan had hoped for higher. “Can other portions be repaired?”

“Some, sir. Others were thoroughly destroyed by the Alliance. We’ll need time to evaluate specifics.”

Calixte sidled next to Roan and asked, “Admiral, have you been in contact with the Rendili government yet?”

Yage’s face went hard and his eyes lingered on Calixte, but only for a second. Roan knew they’d been married once. He’d also been informed that she was now intimate with Morlish Veed, Yage’s direct superior, though Roan was unclear how long they’d been connected, or how deeply. They were still trying to keep it hidden.

Yage turned his eyes back to the emperor. “I’ve spoken with their ruling council. They are understandably upset about the damage done to their facilities, but they’re willing to start servicing our ships right away.”

“Then I recommend you get to it. You’re to hold position at Rendili until further orders.”

“Very good, Majesty.” Yage snapped a salute, and Roan favored him with a nod before killing the transmittal.

“Just by depriving the Alliance of the shipyards, we succeeded today,” Darth Maladi said. Those were her first words since the battle began.

“Yes, *we* did,” Roan said. “Your services were appreciated as always... Lady Maladi.”

It was invitation for her to go, but she didn’t take it. She reached down, tapped the table’s controls, and replaced the tactical display of Rendili with a map of the galaxy. Roan didn’t scold her for the presumption, not because it wasn’t within his rights but because it would have seemed petty.

“Over the past two years, through a mix of conquest and voluntary annexation, the Empire has more than doubled its territory,” Maladi said.

This was true. Imperial-aligned sectors had swelled to cover nearly half the galaxy in an arc from the Unknown Regions,

past the Hydian Way and the Perlemian until it almost abutted Hutt Space. While impressive on a map, most of those planets were Outer and Mid-Rim worlds unremarkable for their population or resources. The Alliance was besieged in the Core but still held onto the galaxy's most wealthy and populous worlds. Pools of white light on the map denoted officially neutral parties, from the Corellians to the Hapans. As Imperial territory had expanded, many formerly-neutral worlds had allowed themselves to be swallowed by the Empire. For the most part, the Empire used those worlds to move resources and barely involved itself with local government.

"When we came to you two years ago," Maladi continued, "The war was at a tipping point. We've reached another, very different one here."

"We do not have the resources to seize the Core," Roan told her. "We've increased industrial output, but we simply aren't there yet. Even if it *were* within our powers, it would probably play out just like Rendili. The Alliance will fight hard for those worlds and leave a mess behind on every one we take from them."

Maladi made a scolding sound. "Emperor Fel, you still lack imagination."

"Do the Sith have a massive fleet we haven't noticed yet?" asked Calixte dryly. "Perhaps some ancient superweapon hidden somewhere?"

"I'm afraid not," Maladi deadpanned. "However, I believe it is a mistake to assume we *need* to conquer all those worlds."

"Planets that weren't eager to join this war didn't join," Roan said. "Those ones that are still in it are willing to make a stand."

Maladi shook her head. "At the beginning, yes, because they thought they could win. Put bluntly, it's an even match now, but we have momentum on our side, so it appears we are winning. Tip things just a little more in our favor and we will break their fighting spirit. Break their spirit and they'll surrender."

"The entire Alliance?" Calixte raised a brow.

Maladi's red-gold stayed on Roan. "The Empire has been very tolerant to planets it's conquered thus far. You've been adamant on that, Your Majesty, and despite their internal propaganda, most in the Alliance have seen that. There will always be bitter-enders, but beings from the Core are soft. They'd rather see Imperial crests in their city square than watch missiles rain down on it."

"And the senate? The triumvirate?"

"Ruling the galaxy is no easy task. The Alliance had a massive administrative apparatus that's ready-made. As long as they stay loyal to you- and as long as you remain the wise, just ruler you have been- I'm sure all parties can be content."

It wasn't like Maladi to flatter, which meant she was really serious about this. When the war had started, Roan had hoped to grab control of some Alliance sectors and possibly gain a foothold in the Core, then force Coruscant to sue for peace. Now Maladi talked about controlling the entire galaxy with a single hand, in a way that hadn't been done in over a century.

Since Palpatine, in short.

That thought sobered him. Victory had a sweet scent, but with Sith involved there was always something rotten beneath it. If the Empire did totally dominate the Alliance, the Sith would not be content. They might continue to use him like a puppet; they might supplant him with a better pawn, like Veed.

Roan was very determined that this not happen.

"Forcing the Alliance to surrender wouldn't be easy," he told the two women.

"They nearly crippled us with their trap at Champala and Paqualis III," said Calixte. "If we can lay a trap of our own, we might remove their main fleet from the war."

"We might," Roan said, "So long as your spy network is superior to that of your predecessor."

"I assure you, it is." Calixte smiled. "Just give me a few days and I will have a plan to end this war."

Roan gave her a nod, but he knew that even if Calixte's plan worked it would only end the war without. The greater

war was the one within, and for that there was no victory in sight.

The one salve on the Alliance's fighting retreat from Rendili was that the Fifth Fleet had suffered relatively minor damage in the process. The Imperials had been more focused on saving the orbital shipyards than destroying Alliance ships, which meant Stazi's fleet would need relatively few repairs once they reached the 'yards at Nubia, which were thankfully still in friendly hands.

That was pretty much the only consolation available. As *Indomitable* and the rest of its fleet headed for Nubia, Yorub joined Stazi in the admiral's office, where he was taking a call. Yorub wasn't privy to Stazi's conversations with Supreme Commander Petan, the triumvirate, or the defense council, but this was a more personal talk. The Fourth Fleet's commander, Eron Nict, was a Corellian, and though his homeworld was neutral in this the admiral was not. He and Stazi had known each other since their academy days and they sometimes exchanged scraps of unofficial gossip.

"We did our best to deny them Rendili," Stazi was saying. "I'd like to think we smashed around half of their equipment, which unfortunately still leaves too much in their hands."

"I heard the locals sold you out," Nict grunted. Though the blue holo robbed him of color, Yorub remembered him as a brown-haired, light-skinned man.

"As happens all too often, lately," Stazi agreed.

"At least our losses weren't bad," Yorub offered.

"Yes, and the more systems we lose, the less we have to defend," Nict said sourly. "There's an upside to everything. And did you hear? The Imps have supposedly moved a major battle group into the Carida System."

"There's not much there except stardust," said Stazi.

"Yes, but that's the point. I've heard Bastion is turning it into a big propaganda piece. Securing rightful Imperial territory after more than a century, honoring the soldiers slaughtered by evil Jedi, that sort of thing."

"How depressingly appropriate."

"Where did you hear that?" asked Yorub. There wasn't anything left where Carida had been, but it was dangerously near the Core, within easy striking distance of major worlds like Brentaal or Arkania. Or, more appropriately, Caamas and Alderaan. The supernova remnants also mucked up even the best sensors arrays, making it a good place to hide.

"Rumors from a captain I know in the Second Fleet," Nict said. "No official word from Intel, but I'm sure they're looking into it." Almost apologetically he added, "It *could* be nothing."

"It could," Stazi admitted. "According to rumors there's Imp fleets lurking in every nebula and asteroid field nowadays."

That was about the sum of it. Paranoida was the guiding principle nowadays. The Alliance had been pressed more and more into the Core, and steadily its soldiers felt more under siege. Core worlds hadn't seen major conflict in a century, and there were also plentiful rumors about such-and-such world striking secret pacts with the Empire. Given the behavior of Rendili's government, Yorub couldn't just dismiss them.

"Well, when they come, we'll fight them," Nict grunted. "Wherever they come from."

Yorub admired the man's resolve. As a Corellian he could have easily pulled off his uniform and sat out this war in comfort, but he'd stuck with the Alliance and with his principles. Admiral Stazi, by contrast, had no home to go to, and Yorub sometimes wondered if that didn't fuel the Duros' restless energy.

And then there was Yorub himself. The thought of retreating to some warren on Sullust, far from all this fighting, occurred more and more often now.

But he thought on Stazi and Nict, decidedly different men but united in their fortitude. If it weren't for beings like them, the whole galaxy would have kowtowed to the Empire and their Sith helpers. Being with them humbled Yorub a little and reminded him of his duty.

"That's right," the captain said aloud. "Whenever and wherever. We'll be ready."

He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt.

Eshkar Niin knew he was a liar and a traitor, a man who wore a mask over his real face half the time, but he was no longer sure which face was real and which was the disguise. At the beginning he'd known or thought he had, but over the past two years he'd lost all certainty. Often, he thought he was going mad.

Keeping secrets from other Force-users was no small thing, especially the empress and especially when they were meeting one-on-one. He met her in one of her private rooms in the palace to brief her on his mission to Berchest, where he'd been sent to secretly monitor Sith activity. He did his best to dwell on the truth of his story, in words and in thought, and to skirt around the lies.

"The Sith didn't find any Jedi in Calius saj Leeloo, but it wasn't for lack of trying. They had two Lords inserted in our stormtrooper squads, just as they said they would. Those teams combed the city for three days but got nothing."

That was true, and it matched with reports the stormtrooper garrison had sent back to Bastion. The empress, leaning against the side of her desk with arms crossed, nodded for him to go on.

"There *were* more Sith, ones we weren't aware of. The ones with our troops were in communication with at least three more. Those ones were also searching for Jedi. They were disguised as other things. Most of those ones didn't have the red-and-black facial markers we've seen, but I could feel their power clearly in the Force."

That was also true, as far as it went.

Elliah asked, "You're certain they didn't know you were stalking them?"

This was where the lie came in. He could never tell her that he'd alerted the Sith on Berchest to his presence in advance and that he'd engaged in extended conversation with one of them, where he'd been coached in exactly what information to give the empress. Among other things Darth Maleval, a fearsome scarlet-faced Quarren, had ordered him to hide the fact that the Jedi-hunters on Berchest had succeeded in

finding a knight and her padawan, and killed both after a fair amount of torture.

"If they knew," Niin told his empress, "They gave no indication."

A slight frown creased the Empress' face as she looked out the window at Ravelin's skyline. "If they knew, they probably *wouldn't*," she said. "This 'partnership' we have is sustained by a pretense, and both sides know it's a pretense. When the Alliance is defeated, it will be a battle between Sith and Imperial Knights for control of the galaxy."

Maleval had told him the same thing, and it had filled him with dread. "What of the Jedi?"

"The Sith only have one thing planned for the Jedi," Elliah said darkly. "But the Jedi are our brothers and sisters. The emperor will not allow them to be slaughtered."

"That will pitch him against the Sith. But I suppose that's inevitable anyway."

"Exactly. I can't tell you the details yet, Eshkar, but the end of the war with the Alliance may be close. Very close. That will escalate the second war, the more important war." It was so close to what Maleval had said he almost shuddered. Her voice hardened as she said, "The emperor depends on the resolve of *all* his Knights."

It didn't sound like an accusation, but it triggered a spike of panic. Niin tried to hide it, suppress it, but Elliah turned from the window and regarded him. "You are one of our most trusted knights, Eshkar. We need you to set an example."

"I understand."

"You, Treis, Mohrgan, Hogrum. His Majesty relies on you four more than anyone. When it comes to battle against the Sith, we'll need you leading the charge. Treis and Mohrgan have fought Sith before, on Hapes. They'll advise you."

"You did too, Majesty."

She looked down, frowning, but there was a bittersweet tilt to her lips. It reminded Niin of how she'd been as an apprentice Knight, an outsider uncertain in her powers and place in the Empire. That was the woman he'd fallen in love with, when they were young.

"I barely knew I had the Force then," Elliah said. "I certainly didn't know how to use it. Roan, Treis, Mohrgan... They were always warriors. They had to be."

Niin swallowed. "If they defeated the Sith once, I'm sure they can do it again."

"We worked together with the Jedi then. There was trust between our peoples." The frown turned deeper, mournful. "Now we have to stand alone."

Niin said nothing. Her expression firmed, her body straightened. She told him, "The battle with the Sith may come suddenly, and we need to be prepared. You are our master strategist. Please, think of how we can secure victory."

It was an order he could not refuse. He bowed respectfully and left her chamber. Niin made a quick retreat and did not allow his suppressed thoughts to rise until he was fully alone. He went to Imperial Knights' training complex and stepped out onto one of the balconies overlooking the city. It was mid-afternoon and there was no Maladi lurking here for him, no Sith at all. She was kept under constant surveillance, of course, as were all other Sith on Bastion. It was only on missions to other worlds that Niin met with the Sith and received lessons in using the Force's dark side.

His mind drifted back to his talk with Maleval. Like Elliah, the Sith had insisted that a reckoning was coming, that it would be violent, and that Eshkar Niin, whatever he truly was, would have to stand with one side. The horror was that they were both right. When he'd been on Berchest, meeting with Maleval, he'd believed with all his heart that he belonged to the Sith. They'd shown him raw power greater than anything the disciplined Imperial Knights could muster, and more, he was amazed by the ruthless genius of a sect that had turned both sides of the war into playthings. The future of the galaxy lay clearly in their hands.

Yet his resolve broke when he came back to Bastion. Back to Elliah.

He remembered something specific Darth Maleval had told him. The Quarren's mouth-tentacles had twitched with sadistic pleasure as he'd said, "Every adept of the dark side

must pass a test before becoming Sith. For Darth Nihl it was killing the Alliance's chief admiral and escaping to tell the tale. But it is not always a matter of combat prowess. Every Sith must destroy the man he was before, and for some that is the greatest challenge."

And Niin had asked, "How do I destroy him?"

"You must destroy the thing he loves most. He must murder it, and savor his own pain while he does so. Then the weak man will be gone forever."

Niin wasn't sure how well he'd hidden his thought of the empress. He wasn't sure how well he'd hidden his thoughts from her today. He was uncertain of everything, tense, paranoid. It was agony and he wanted to end it. He saw two ways to do so, two lives to take, but he hadn't the strength to end either of them.

For now Eshkar Niin was trapped, but only for now. Everything would change soon; on that alone, Elliah and Maleval had agreed.

Though Kol Skywalker had often butted heads with Piers Petan since the man replaced Lekhwash as supreme commander, he felt only sympathy for the admiral as he stood in front of the triumvirs.

"We need a victory, and we need it soon," Nu Toreena insisted.

"We were able to deny the Empire use of many facilities on Rendili," Petan offered weakly.

"A half-successful rearguard action is no victory," Bail Antilles said. "The Empire is getting dangerously close to the Core. We can be sure they'll launch a major assault soon. If we don't stop it, morale in the entire fleet will crumble."

Kol, standing in one corner of the room, thought it was already perilously close to that.

"I am in daily contact with Ekorian," Petan insisted. "I am doing everything I can to adjust our strategy to her intelligence."

"What we really need is an offensive," said Toreena.

"I have looked into that," said Petan, "And I do see several options. A counter-attack at Rendili, while their forces are

under repair. We may not retake the shipyards but we can damage them even more.”

The triumvirs considered but were visibly unimpressed. They wanted to take worlds from the Empire again. It had been too long since the Alliance had done that.

“I understand that with Admiral Slossar and the Fourth Fleet stuck at Kashyyyk, our offensive abilities are strained,” said Gial Gahan, “But the Imperials are spreading themselves thin at points. They must have weaknesses that can be exploited.”

Petan launched into a short list of possible systems the Empire had left lightly defended, though major redoubts were located nearby. The triumvirs ordered him to draw up tentative plans for an offensive and Petan said he would.

Kol had already had his turn at the start of the meeting, so he and Petan left the chamber together. As they made their way through the halls, the admiral said under his breath, “I hope we can count on your assistance, Master Jedi.”

“Always,” Kol said.

That was the extent of the conversation; Petan clearly had other things on his mind. The admiral took an airspeeder to the defense headquarters complex, while Kol took another to the Jedi consulate.

Once the seat of the Order, the building had been constructed by Kol’s great-grandfather after the Yuuzhan Vong War on the site of the previous Jedi Temple. After Luke had removed the entire Order to Ossus the great structure had sat nearly vacant for decades, with only a handful of Jedi and droids to maintain its elegant corridors. This war had made it a busy place once again, and since fighting had increasingly contracted toward the Core it had become the base of operations for most Jedi. Now there were more knights here than on Ossus, which worried Kol, not least because his son was still at the ancient academy world.

Despite the activity here Kol felt alone. Cade was on Ossus, Nat in Wookiee space. Arlen Fel was also offworld, as were ancient masters Tr’a Saa, Lowbacca, and K’Kruhk, whom he’d always looked to for counsel. There were so many unfamiliar faces among these knights on Coruscant, and too

many of them seemed too young. That ached him, made him feel older. The brave enthusiasm many Jedi had shown at the start of this war had given way to tired determination.

After returning to the Jedi consulate, Kol sought out Ayen Qemar. The elderly Nautolan woman was taking a rare break in one of the meditation rooms, but she welcomed Kol in when he appeared.

Kol sat down on the low stool opposite hers. "Master Qemar, I'd like you to get in contact with Piers Petan. Personally assure him that Jedi will be ready to help on his next offensive. You should begin drawing up a list of pilots."

"Very well," she said. "Where are we going?"

"That's to be determined, but the triumvirate insists on having a victory and taking back some worlds from the Empire. I can hardly blame them."

"No. I suppose not. I'll let Petan know we have his back."

"Good. And be ready to move on short notice." He stood up and turned for the door. "Thank you for understanding."

"We do what we must," Qemar muttered, which felt like a summary of just about everything now. Kol stepped out of the room and left her to her thoughts.

Elliah could not remember the last time she'd seen her husband smile, but his expression was at least contented as he watched his daughter spar. At thirteen years old, Marasiah was stretching out toward adulthood. She moved with light long steps across the practice mat and she hefted her white-bladed lightsaber in a strong grip. Marasiah's parents and grandmother stood on the mat's edge, but if she'd noticed her family's arrival she gave no sign. All her attention was focused on her opponent.

Elke Vetter was a young Knight ordained at the start of the war, but the blond woman had proven a good mentor for Marasiah, capable of acting as friend to the princess but also willing to lay down stern authority when necessary. Marasiah's face was tight with concentration, her eyes locked on Elke's white blade as she parried attacks and made tentative strikes of her own. They were using live and potentially deadly weapons, and Elliah was as tense as her

daughter as glowing blades flicked perilously close to arms and legs.

Elke had more strength and more training than Marasiah, so the end of the match was never in doubt, but Elliah saw she varied speed and style of attacks, sometimes leaving herself open to see whether Marasiah would respond. Elliah sensed a conservatism from her daughter; as much as Marasiah wanted to show her skill, she was deathly afraid of making a mistake.

She got more confident as she went on, slipping in more attacks until Elke summoned her full skills and went after Marasiah hard. Elliah almost winced as Marasiah frantically parried blow after blow. She was forced back step after step to the edge of the practice mat and stumbled off, ending the fight.

Marasiah stifled her scowl and gave Elke a respectful bow. Only then did she seem to notice her parents and grandmother standing on the opposite side of the mat.

"You did well," Roan said, voice as warm as it could be nowadays. "You're getting better every time."

"I have a long way to go, Father, I know that."

"Yes, and you have time to learn," the elder Marasiah said. "So there's no reason to get frustrated or impatient."

The princess' face said she didn't really believe that. Life in the palace on Bastion sheltered her somewhat, but as her father's official heir she was more aware of the war and its toll than most thirteen-year-olds were, or should be. Elliah had also grown up in a time of strife, and a part of her felt like a failure for not securing a better youth for her daughter.

"You can go clean up and change now," she told Marasiah. "When you're done, we can have dinner."

"Together?" Marasiah looked from her parents to her grandmother. It had become rare for the four of them to do anything as one.

"Together." Roan mustered his half-smile. "So like your mother said, go clean up."

Marasiah gave her family little bows and hurried away. With a nod from her emperor, Elke Vetter followed.

"She is getting better," the elder Marsiah said, "But she's still impatient."

"Weren't you when you were young?" asked Elliah.

"Not as much as her. But then, I didn't have the weight of an empire looming over me." The old woman looked to her son. "Any war news?"

"Sha Dun is tightening the noose around Wookiee space," Roan said. "It will be tough battle, and it may cost us badly, but I think he's the right admiral for the job."

"I hope so. Sha Dun's mother served with your father and I on *Voidwalker*. He respected her a great deal." Marasiah's smile was melancholy with memory.

"I know."

She lowered her voice. "And our Sith allies?"

"Still apparently compliant... for now."

Elliah thought on what Niin had just told her and decided to wait until she had her husband alone to speak on it. The conversation might get awkwardly personal.

"I know you've put up contingency plans for dealing with the Sith," Marasiah said. "But do you think they'll be enough? They're not likely to fall for a trick they made up themselves."

Roan's response was a low grunt. Only a select few beings, and none of his top military commanders, knew that Roan had recorded an executive order for all stormtrooper companies commanding them to shoot any Sith on sight. Unlike the Jedi during the Clone Wars, Krayt's minions would be expecting a backstab. Roan's maneuver might take down some of them, but he needed something more.

"I'm working on contingencies. All the more, now that we're pressing into the Core."

"I'll work on some of my own," Marasiah said. She was an old woman now, but Elliah knew she could be suitably ruthless. During Roan's early years on the throne she'd been regent in all but name.

Marasiah, Roan, and Elliah left the practice chamber and moved slowly through the halls. The former empress excused herself, leaving them alone. The Imperial Knight's academy was the only place besides the palace where they

ever moved without bodyguards, and they were grateful for the privacy.

Elliah linked her arm into her husband's and took a deep breath. The chance to be together as a family was frustratingly rare, and when it did come it brought a warm glow. It was almost enough to distract her from her meeting with Eshkar Niin, but not quite.

In a low voice she told her husband, "I debriefed Master Niin about his mission to Berchest."

"What did he say?"

"What we expected, more or less. Two Sith agents working with our stormtroopers, plus three independent agents. They found no Jedi."

Roan gave a low grunt she'd learned to read as satisfied.

"Master Niin was acting... distracted. He has been for some time."

"The war's been taking a toll on us all. I think he still blames himself for sending Jade Skywalker to Mustafar."

"Perhaps," Elliah said, though she'd never known Niin to care much about Jedi. "I think it may be something else."

Roan stopped walking. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I can feel his conflict in the Force..."

He angled to face her. "What manner of conflict?"

Elliah exhaled, looked down. "I'm not sure... I know that Eshkar has... feelings for me. He has for a very long time."

Roan didn't show surprise. Of course he'd noticed it too. "And do you think that's the conflict?"

"Honestly, I doubt it. It's never interfered with his role as a Knight, not in all these years. This feels like... something else. When he talked about his mission to Berchest there were points where he seemed evasive."

"He *lied*?" Roan's voice went hard. Lying to the emperor or empress was strictly against an Imperial Knight's vows.

"I'm not sure," Elliah exhaled. "I only had a feeling. I didn't press him. It could be nothing."

"You wouldn't bring this up if it were nothing."

"No."

Roan thought a moment. "I believe Knight Draco is on his way back from Nessem."

Still impetuous but loyal beyond doubt, Niin's former apprentice was one of many granted Knighthood shortly after the Sith announced their presence. "I didn't think his and Niin's paths had crossed much lately."

"They haven't, but Draco knows Niin well. He'll be able to spot a change if there is one."

"Perhaps you should have him look into Berchest too."

"I believe I will."

Their voices had dropped to whispers. They were discussing only vaguely supposition, not even rumor, but that was bad enough. No Imperial Knight had ever abandoned vows before, and Eshkar Niin was one of the most trusted and senior members of the order. He'd been a confidant and friend to Elliah for decades.

It was awful to even consider, but this was a time of treason where no one could be trusted.

Roan tried a smile, but as usual it only went halfway. "I'll send Draco a message immediately and tell him to stop at Berchest. You can go ahead and order the servant droids to get supper ready. Then my mother and Siah will come and we can forget all about this for a time."

Elliah smiled back, or tried to. Family time should have come more often and meant more than a distraction, but she'd take what she was given.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Her husband and daughter were reduced to shrunken blue holo-image, occasionally flickering with static interference, but the sight of them still warmed Marin's heart. Ania was almost twelve years old now, visibly closer to adolescence every time Marin saw her. She felt like she was missing out on something vital, just as she'd sworn not to do, but to have ignored the plight of the Jedi would have wrenched her with unbearable guilt.

"We unloaded everything we needed to at Paqwepori," Benet was explaining. "Next stop, Alanteen."

"Have you heard about trouble?" Marin asked.

"No. The Corellian Run's still a pretty safe route."

"Fighting's inching your way. Be careful."

"I was going to say the same to you." He smiled with serious eyes.

"Can we meet you someplace, Mom?" Ania asked.

"That would be a little tricky." They were set to arrive at Kashyyyk soon, and while most of the Mytaranor sector was in Alliance hands, surrounding sectors were not. The Imperials were drawing a noose around Wookiee space, effectively trapping the Alliance's Fourth Fleet. Smaller and technically-civilian ships like the *Bottom Line* and *Fast Start* might be able to slip past the Imps safely, but it still involved risk Marin wasn't willing to take.

"Not right now," Marin said. "Where are you due after Alanteen?"

"We're set to pick up cargo," Benet explained. "Not sure about the destination."

"Well, keep me informed. And I'll keep you informed."

"Did you rescue the Jedi from Chalacta?" asked Ania.

"We did. We're about to dump them on Kashyyk. They'll be safe there."

Marin had explained to their daughter that she was helping retrieve Jedi from Imperial-occupied worlds, just like she'd explained that she was a relative of the emperor. She always danced around the full truth, and Ania was old enough to know her mother was holding things back, but she'd never pressed for greater explanation. Marin had a feeling Ania was waiting for a face-to-face conversation, which they hadn't had in months.

"Do *you* have another job lined up?" asked Benet.

"Not yet. But I'll let you know."

"All right. If you think you can slip away to Alanteen—"

"I know. I'll just see how it goes."

Benet's smile was weak, brittle. At the start of this war he'd pressed her to do what she could to help the Jedi. Now, three long years later, she could tell he wanted her back more than anything.

Once she shut down the transmission, Marin made her way to the *Bottom Line*'s cockpit. The ship was almost at Kashyyyk, and the space was crammed with Jind and Mekk in the front seats, Nat and Tamar riding passenger behind them. Marin waited as they ran checks and braced herself against the back wall as they dropped out of lightspeed. The light-whirl became a starfield with a green marble at the center.

As they approached Marin spotted scattered warships in orbit over Kashyyyk: heavy MC140 *Scythe*-class cruisers, lighter MC75 *ShaShore*-class frigates, corvettes and pickets of various designs. The Fourth Fleet had scattered different task forces across the sector to protect key worlds, but Kashyyyk held the largest cluster, including Admiral Slossar's flagship.

The *Bottom Line* broadcast its identification code as it dropped into the atmosphere and vectored for Thikiianna, the

city they'd departed from at the start of this mission. A sprawling collection of buildings and landing pads had been built into the upper canopy of the great wroshyr forest, and as the *Bottom Line* circled and descended, Marin marked the newly-added gun turrets scattered among the treetops. The Wookiees had suffered from too many of the old Empire's predations to believe Roan Fel's anodyne assurances. She prayed that the fighting never came here, because if it did it would be very ugly.

After the ship set down Jind announced, "We're all good. Tell the cargo they can get some fresh air."

"I'm sure they'll be happy to hear it," Marin said and slipped out of the cockpit. She was looking forward to it herself.

When the landing ramp came down, she joined the Jedi and two still-bewildered Chalactans as the group stepped out onto the pad. The warm, fragrant Kashyyyk air was indeed welcome, and Marin took a moment to admire the pure-blue sky, marred only by drifting flocks of avians high above.

Then she turned her attention to the little Jedi reunion. The Oolid, Grolik, shook hands with Master Zho Tuum, a tall furry Cathar. Neither of them looked badly out of place among the Wookiees, she thought. A handful of other Jedi had come to greet their rescued comrades, and Marin felt slight envy for their easy fraternity. Even when she'd been a Jedi, she'd never felt that accepted among her fellows.

She'd expected to see Lowbacca with the welcoming party, but the hard-to-miss Wookiee wasn't there. She wondered if he'd been called someplace else; he was a busy Master, acting as three-way liaison between the Jedi, the local government, and the Fourth Fleet.

Curiosity was cut short by the sight of one white-haired head emerging from the crowd. Marin's jaw dropped as her father separated from the group and walked toward her. They communicated fairly frequently over holo-transmission but it had been almost a year since they'd met in the flesh, and she'd thought he was busy on Coruscant.

"You don't have to look so appalled." Arlen smiled beneath his beard. Seen in-person, in Kashyyyk's bright

daylight, all the lines of his face were so clear. He looked so old, but at least he was smiling.

"I'm not. I'm just, um, surprised, Dad. That's all." She didn't know what to do as he got close. Aside from Lowbacca, none of the other Jedi on Kashyyyk knew who she was or what she'd been. Yet when he opened his arms for a hug she found she couldn't deny him.

They embraced, pulled back. She asked, "What are you doing here? And where did you come from?"

"Coruscant. I brought a half-dozen other knights. All able-bodied youngsters." His smile was wry. "Kol Skywalker's orders. He wants to shore up the defense of Wookiee space."

"I'm glad to hear it. I just wondered why, well..."

"Why the old man? I requested it, actually. You and Lowie and Nat were here."

"He's calling himself Bantha nowadays. Bantha Rawk."

"His clean break from the Jedi doesn't seem to have worked out like he'd planned."

"Yeah, well, what does?" She laughed once, a little bitter.

"Anyway, I wanted to see you all, and I've gotten sick of sitting around on Coruscant, sending kids off to do the hard work."

"Not just kids."

"You're still *my* kid." He squeezed her arm.

"That's not exactly what I meant." Marin pivoted and looked back to the *Bottom Line*'s landing ramp. Standing atop it, leaning against a support strut with crossed arms and staring right at them, was a white-haired old woman.

"You're too old to go looking for trouble, Jedi," Tamar called.

"I was going to tell you something similar." Arlen's gaze locked on hers.

Marin didn't know how long it had been since her parents had met face-to-face. Decades, probably. Arlen and Tamar said nothing, just stared at each other, and she knew whatever passed between them- lost years, memories good and bad, satisfaction and regrets for a lifetime- was not for her to know.

But eventually Arlen smiled, and, a little reluctantly at first, so did Tamar, and Marin felt a warm feeling she hadn't known in a long, long time. Ania and Benet were painfully distant, but at this unlikely place and time she'd managed a family reunion after all.

The hub of Thikkiianna's communications center was bathed in dim blue light from the main holo-projector, which displayed the upper half of Admiral Slossar's serpentine body. Lowbacca and seven other Wookiees were gathered in a circle around the image, listening to the Sluissi's update on Imperial fleet movements. Nearby Togoria, home to a proud warrior race like the Wookiees, had just fallen to the Empire after a week-long battle. Umbara, on the Coreward side of the Mytaranor sector, had allowed the Imperials to land without a fight, and on the Rimward side the Imps had occupied most of the Kastolar sector for two months. As the Alliance's Fourth Fleet clustered in Wookiee space the Imperials were trying to surround them on all fronts, and the two sides were currently engaged at Luxrul, New Apsolon, and Terr'skiar.

"We believe the Imperials are also in negotiations with the Hutts to move supplies through their space," Slossar hissed.

Karrashchakuk, standing on the opposite side of the projector from his father, roared that he hoped the Hutts were charging them exorbitantly. Lowbacca asked whether the Fourth needed assistance from the Jedi on any of those fronts.

There was a slight pause as Slossar's comm system translated the Shyriiwook. "Not at any of the battle zones. However, we've had reports that the Imperials are sending negotiators to Randon."

That drew a ripple of angry growls. Randon was the capital of the Mytaranor Sector, a prosperous trading planet with much less fighting spirit than the Wookiees' worlds.

"As we're cut off from Coruscant, our intelligence resources are limited," Slossar continued. "However, the Jedi have unique talents."

Lowbacca assured him that the Jedi would help, then asked the more important question. Were the to Jedi gather

intelligence only, or should they actively sabotage negotiations?

Slossar thought, then decide quickly. "Randon is still an Alliance world. Negotiation with the Empire is treason. Do anything you can to interfere with it."

Lowbacca made it clear he understood. When the transmission ended the Wookiee elders began to slip from the chamber one-by-one, but Lowbacca made his way to his son. Karrashchakuk asked what kind of team the mission would use, and Lowbacca said that Wookiees on Randon would be too visible, too suspicious. Karrashchakuk was disappointed, but nodded agreement. Lowbacca knew his son ached to go back into combat; he was only sixty standard years old, full of youthful energy and eager to do his part. He'd survived dozens of battles in this war and Lowbacca didn't doubt his prowess, but he'd never stop fearing for his son. The death of his elder child, Rallranara, at the hands of Abeloth had left a wound that would never fully heal.

Once the other elders had left the chamber a new figure slipped inside. Lowbacca trilled welcome to his sister Sirrakuk. Like her brother, she'd been a lover of machines and technology from a young age, and she currently managed the communications systems for Thikiianna City. As a youth she'd demonstrated independence by shaving her fur in artful patches, but now that she was older, with authority and family of her own, she'd let her pelt grow into a naturally thick mesh of brown and red.

Sirrakuk announced that the team from Chalacta had returned with all Jedi rescued and no casualties of their own. Lowbacca was grateful, and he immediately wondered whether that team would be willing to head back out to Randon. For a fee, Marin's Mandalorian cadre would be willing to fly anywhere, but he wondered if a softer touch wasn't needed. The situation on Randon was full of uncertainties, and whatever team he sent would have to be capable of both finesse and hard action.

He'd have to think hard and make a decision. Slossar had stressed the need for quick action. It was yet one more responsibility, dealing with one more danger closing in, but

Lowbacca did not feel weighted by his responsibilities. Being back in his childhood home at Thikiianna, along with his sister and son, had rejuvenated his spirits, even though his world was under siege. The arrival of his former apprentice was another unexpected boon, and now Arlen was reunited with his daughter.

War brought many surprises, not all of them bad. It was enough to give a tired, worn-out Jedi hope.

Arlen Fel had been to Kashyyyk before, of course. There was a time when he'd fancied himself more broadly-travelled than any other Jedi in the Order, which hadn't really been true, but he'd always considered himself an adventurer. Spending all those years at the Jedi consulate on Coruscant was supposed to be a well-earned rest for a venerable master, but it had become smothering in a way he hadn't realized until now.

He'd been to Kashyyyk and he'd been to Thikiianna City before, in company of his then-master sixty-some years ago. Being here with Lowbacca again, to say nothing of Marin or Tamar, made the old Jedi feel like the line of his life was closing toward a circle. When he'd been younger that would have bothered him, but not now.

He'd only started to catch up with his daughter when Lowbacca arrived with news and a request. He drew Arlen and Marin aside, as well as Nat, Tamar and Mekk Skirata, and one of the Jedi they'd just rescued from Chalacta, a middle-aged human named Gen Konar.

Lowbacca, with help from a translator droid, explain to them that the Empire was making overtures to the local government at Randon. Those overtures needed to be spoiled and the Alliance's capabilities were limited in this sector.

"I don't mind risking my life for a profit," Mekk grunted, "But my barves, a couple of *jeti* and ex-*jeti* aren't a lot to work with if you want to stop an invasion."

Lowbacca shook his furry head and said that Admiral Slossar would detach one cruiser and its complement of troops to help them in an emergency, but the primary goal was to foil negotiations between the Randoni and the Empire.

If the Alliance came on too strong and too openly it would only drive the Randoni into Imperial arms.

"If I'm hearing correctly," said Arlen, "What you need is one team to scout and second team to stand by for hard action, if necessary. The cruiser is only a last resort."

Lowbacca roared an affirmative.

"Jedi should go with the scouting team, for obvious reasons," Gen Konar said.

"Agreed." Arlen leaned forward, elbows and knees. "I'd like to go."

"This could be dangerous," his daughter warned.

"I know, but you want people can be inconspicuous. Nobody looks twice at an old man."

"I think we all know what team my people belong in," Mekr said. He glanced between Marin and Lowbacca. "I want half payment up-front, of course."

It took another minute to haggle out the price. According to Marin, the Skiratas were being blacklisted by anyone involved with Yaga Auch's, but that didn't stop Mekr from driving a hard bargain. Thankfully the secret Jedi bank accounts, despite all expenditures, had nearly sustained their initial value since the war's beginning thanks to some smart defense-firm investments and insider trading orchestrated by two Calrissians and one crafty Hutt.

With money out of the way they spent the next hour hashing out details of the plan until they were to everyone's liking. When the meeting broke Lowbacca rose and said he'd relay everything to Admiral Slossar. Mekr went off to inform the other Skiratas holed up in the *Bottom Line* and Gen Konar said he would inform the other Jedi and ask for a few volunteers.

That emptied the room of everyone except family. Arlen looked around at his daughter, his old apprentice, his ex-wife. He hadn't seen any of them for a long time until today and in part of his mind they still existed as their younger selves. Nat was the broad-shouldered Jedi warrior without a gray strand in his long blond hair. Marin was the independent young knight who thought she could straddle both halves of her heritage without repercussion. And Tamar was a young

woman too, not a Jedi but never the cold-hearted Mando warrior she wanted to be. Time had winnowed away possible selves and settled them all. Good or bad, they had the lives they'd been given.

"So we're going out again," Marin said. "I don't mind the mission, but I can't say I like the turn-around time."

"I thought I'd get more time with Droo and her kits, but..." Nat shook his head. "Best I could manage is a call back to Kiffex. At least they're safe from all this mess."

"I know the feeling," Marin muttered.

"Where are they now?" Arlen asked his daughter. "On your ship?"

"Yeah. They're on *Fast Start*, taking some cargo to Alanteen."

"Hmmm. That's not *too* far, I guess."

"Dad, no. I'm not getting them involved in this."

"I understand. You can't blame me for thinking about it. A man as old as I am should know his own grandchild."

Marin winced. He didn't mean for his words to hurt, but he couldn't hide the sincerity either. He respected Marin's decision to step away from the Jedi Order, and he knew she'd made the best choice, but he regretted how clearly she'd severed her old life from the new. As a young man Arlen had cherished freedom; now he was old, far nearer to death than he liked to dwell on, and he craved proof of things he'd leave behind. They were locked in a war that was tearing everything down, which made his desire more powerful than ever. It was probably what had driven him to come to Kashyyyk.

"Don't take it personally," Tamar said. "I haven't met her either." She said it flippantly, but with a quiet ache that matched Arlen's.

Marin frowned and looked between her parents. "Maybe we can work something out. I'm not keeping what I'm doing a secret from Ania... but she still doesn't know I used to be a Jedi."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Arlen asked.

"I don't know. For a long time, I thought it might be."

"Does she show any signs of having the Force?" asked Nat.

"I don't think so. I haven't tried to check. She's got good reflexes, and damn good luck, at least sometimes."

"Has she shown any empathic skills? Did she ever guess what you're thinking?" asked Tamar. She'd been about Ania's age before learning she had Jedi ancestry and an adult before getting any training. That late start- among other things- had hindered her Jedi training and led to its failure.

"I haven't seen any of that. I don't *think* she has the Force."

"Might be for the best," Nat grunted. "Sometimes a good blaster at your side is all you need. That and luck."

"We could all use good luck," Tamar said, "Especially if we're going to *shabla* Randon."

Arlen blinked. "You're going with Mekk's team? You're not, um--"

"I'm too old for hard contact. I get that." She crossed her arms. "But if the locals won't look twice at some old man, they won't look at an old woman either."

Arlen wanted to object, but he had a feeling Tamar could still carry any argument.

Marin, softly, said, "You don't have to do this, Mom. You saw how the op on Chalacta almost went bad. There's no telling what's on Randon or if they've got Sith."

"Good thing we're just scouting."

Marin looked to her father for help. Arlen shook his head and she relented.

"Okay, fine." She threw up her hands and looked at Nat. "In addition to scouting for Imps and maybe Sith agents, we get to babysit some stubborn old people. You up for that?"

She said it with a touch of humor, but there was none of that on Nat's face. His brows drew together, his eyes looked far away. He could only be thinking of Mustafar.

"We've got a cruiser backing us up," Arlen said quickly. "That's an insurance plan I approve of. And if we're taking two ships to Randon, we can use mine. It's fast, durable and well-armed."

Marin frowned. "I was planning to take *Runaround*."

"Is it fast, durable, and well-armed?"

She wilted slightly. "Only the first one."

“Wait a minute.” Tamar’s look was incredulous. “*Your* ship, Arlen? Is this the same hunk of junk you’ve had for fifty years?”

“A little more than that, actually, but I’ve kept her up-to-date, all the best repairs. And *Starlight Champion* is not a hunk of junk, it’s a *classic*. In fact-”

Tamar managed to grin and sigh at the same time. “I almost thought you’d matured in your old age.”

“I have. It’s why I appreciate classics.”

She shook her head and walked away, but she was still smiling. Arlen found he was too. This mission ahead was risky, but just being among the people he cared about- Marin, Nat, Lowbacca, even Tamar- made him feel younger than he had in decades.

Chasima was the nightmare Khat Lah remembered, but something here felt *wrong* in a way it had not when he’d visited two years before. Nei Rin assured that no significant changes had taken place in the planet’s biome, which meant, empirically, that the change had taken place inside himself. That was little cause for comfort.

Since the start of the war, the master shaper had labored to discover the cause of the affliction that had ruined the hundred worlds in the Ossus Project. She labored even as the war grew and her efforts seemed less and less likely to stop the conflagration. Khat Lah sensed she was being driven by guilt and need for redemption, and he was no stranger to the power of those feelings.

Since Mustafar he’d spent most of his time with Nei Rin, travelling with her as she searched the galaxy for hints of its salvation. He did it because their motivations were the same, and because it kept him apart from most of the Jedi. He was afraid of interacting with them, afraid of what they might see. Since Nat Skywalker had uttered those four words to him after their escape from Mustafar, nothing had been the same.

You have the Force, Skywalker had said.

Khat Lah didn’t know what that meant or how it could be, but Skywalker had assured him he was visible to the Jedi’s ethereal senses. He’d had Nei Rin examine his blood cells for

signs of midi-chlorian creatures that allowed Jedi to commune with the Force. She'd found none, which only deepened the mystery.

He would have asked the Jedi about it had it not been for Mustafar. Rather than beg help from the Jedi Master whose mother he'd failed to save, Khat Lah had cast himself out and joined Nei Rin in her wandering.

They'd made shambling progress over the past two years. Thanks to the mission where they'd copied memory engrams from the planet's world brain, Nei Rin knew more about Chasima than any others, so she'd chosen to test her hypothesis here. The world brain, she'd said, had been corrupted by the insertion of false memories into its neural cortex. The world brain had been convinced it was under dire threat and had responded by transforming the life-forms it ruled into monsters.

Killing the world brain, she'd said, would only add more chaos to the planet's biosphere. The only hope was to *correct* the world brain's memories, and that meant they had to pay it a second visit.

That was why Khat Lah hunched close to Nei Rin as she huddled against stalk of the world brain's great eye, elbows-deep in a crevasse of cut-open muscle tissue that protected the creature's nerve stalk. They'd dropped a neutralizing agent, as they had two years before, only this time with twice the amount of anesthesia. Whether it would work long enough to perform the proper surgery, Khat Lah didn't know. He kept anxiously glancing up at the Sekotan flier. A long cabled vine hung from its open landing ramp and two Yuuzhan Vong warriors watching from above.

Choka Skell and Liaan Lah belonged to a different sect than Khat Lah, one the venerated the prophet Yu'shaa. Though they did not scarify themselves, their faces were laced with patterned tattoos, in contrast to Khat Lah's pale mien. He knew them to be honorable warriors, despite their differences in belief. Still, he'd never become fully comfortable around them. Partially it was because they reminded him of Vua Yaght and Besh Lah. Partially it was because they felt *strange* to him, lifelike but hollow as a

mannequin. Nei Rin did too sometimes, though he'd known her for years. That was in contrast to the group's newest arrival, who bent next to Nei Rin and assisted in the operation.

Her name was Leoli Ti, and she was a Jedi. Khat Lah had not met the pale-skinned, black-human woman until they rendezvoused with her ship, a tiny gray shuttle, in orbit over Chasima. Nei Rin said she'd been helping with research all these years and she clearly knew about the neural network of a world brain, but Khat Lah had never heard of her.

All he could tell was that Leoli Ti was *alive*. He couldn't describe it in words, but there was a brightness, a motion, a tangible self around this Jedi that the three Yuuzhan Vong lacked. The Force must have been telling him this, somehow, and it made him understand the Jedi a little more. A hundred years ago they'd faced the Yuuzhan Vong and found them hollow mannequins, lifelike but disturbingly false, as absent from their beloved Force as the sun from midnight.

He finally understood why the Jedi, why all of this galaxy, hated and feared Yuuzhan Vong. The very life-power that guided them screamed that the invaders were *wrong*, a disease corrupting a body, fundamentally at odds with the way the universe should be.

He had been one such abomination before his transformation on Mustafar. What he was now, he had no idea.

He did not know how long they worked, but eventually Nei Rin and Leoli Ti both stepped back from the cut they'd made into the world brain's thick eye-stalk. They were both covered up to their elbow in violet muck, and the Jedi grabbed a rag to clean them off.

"Is the work complete?" asked Khat Lah.

"We've reconnected the world brain's central cortex to its motor systems," said the Jedi. "It should wake up soon." She'd been giving Khat Lah lingering looks since they'd met in orbit. He knew she'd have questions later. He hoped she had answers as well.

The world brain started to stir beneath them, its tentacles churning the brackish pool that filled the brain's great crater. Khat Lah gestured to the flyer above. It dipped low and the

warriors dropped the vine. Nei Rin ascended first, followed by the Jedi. The surface beneath Khat Lah's feet was just starting to tremble when he grabbed the vine with both hands and began shimmying up. Even before he reached the ramp, the flyer lifted skyward. Nei Rin and Leoli Ti were safely inside when Choka Skell and Lian Lah pulled him aboard.

They could feel the flyer rise higher as all five of them marched up to the cockpit. The sole being inside was another arrival who'd met them in orbit, and like the human he was bright in the Force.

The similarities ended there: Jedi Master K'Krukh was a three-meter behemoth with a tusked face and long tangled fur, brown turning gray with age. He felt, somehow, more alive than the younger human. He was three times her size, but Khat Lah felt that had nothing to do with it. Even before this meeting he'd known K'Krukh by reputation as one of the most ancient, venerable, and powerful Jedi in the galaxy.

And just like Leoli Ti, the Whiphid's small eyes tracked Khat Lah as he entered the cockpit.

"The operation was a success," Nei Rin announced in Basic, wiping residual muck from her hands on the apron of her skirt. "What effect it will have, I cannot say. We will have to wait to see the results."

"How much time do you think it will take before the operation shows results?" asked K'Krukh.

"I have no way of knowing. The corruption of the world brains happened very fast, but making a wound is always faster than healing one. The savage organisms may fight back. It may take months, even years before we see progress."

"Still," K'Krukh grunted, "Today was an important day."

"I like to think so." Nei Rin's smile was weary. "But time will tell."

"Indeed. I thank you all for your help." K'Krukh's gaze passed across the four Yuuzhan Vong. "What will you do now, Master Shaper?"

"There is still more research to be done, and more work. We'd planned to leave several probes over Chasima to watch its progress, then go to Euceron."

"Another damaged world."

"Yes, though it displays some variations from the others I want to investigate."

"I understand." K'Kruhk's intense gaze dropped onto Khat Lah and held. "Liaan Lah, Choka Skell, thank you for your service. You may retire. I'd like to continue this conversation in private."

The warriors snapped salutes, fists to shoulders, and obediently marched out of the cabin. Khat Lah drew in breath, stood straight, and felt the two Jedi stare him up-and-down.

Finally K'Kruhk said, "Khat Lah, how are you *possible*?"

"I have wondered that myself."

"But you know what you are. How you are different."

"I know, but I don't understand."

"I've heard your name, Khat Lah. I know you have been with us since the war began. I know you went with Jade Skywalker and her son to Mustafar with two companions, and only you and Nat returned."

"Yes. That was when the... change in me happened. It was Skywalker who first noticed, after we escaped Mustafar."

"But not before?"

"No. Not before."

The Whiphid made a thoughtful, rumbling sound. Leoli Ti asked the master shaper, "Have you examined him for physiological changes?"

"Nothing has changed that I can see," Nei Rin said. "There are no midi-chlorians in his body, just as before."

The human looked questioningly at K'Kruhk. "Midi-chlorians are how we touch the Force. This should be impossible."

"The Force has many mysteries.... Though I've never met one such as this." K'Kruhk folded long-clawed hands atop each other. "Tell me, Khat Lah, do you *feel* different, inside?"

"That is... hard to say, Master *Jeedai*. Every being changes inside, from day to day. Are you the same being you were two years ago? Two decades? I'm sure I'm different... but it is hard to know. However... I *see* differently."

“How?”

“When I look at you and *Jeedai* Ti, I know you are alive. I cannot say how I know, but I know you are living, thinking, feeling beings. I know you are bright inside. When I look at the master shaper...” He winced in apology. “I am sorry. I see none of those things.”

“Then you are aware of the Force, as it is aware of you,” K’Kruhk said. “Fascinating. Why haven’t you told the other Jedi about this?”

“It is hard to explain. A handful of *Jeedai* have helped us since then, and I’ve made them swear to secrecy.”

“I can swear as well, but I’d like to know why.”

He looked down at his feet. “I’ve pledged myself to the *Jeedai*... but I’ve failed them, again and again. I failed to save Reikar Horn at Duro. I failed to save Jade Skywalker at Mustafar.”

“You also defended the younglings during the attack on the temple,” Nei Rin said, “And I could never have accomplished what I have these three years without you. We are *all* in your debt, Khat Lah.”

He put a hand to his heart. “I am... afraid of this change inside me. I am afraid I don’t deserve it.” He was a Yuuzhan Vong warrior, committed to bravery and honor. The admission gave him physical pain.

After a long silence, Leoli Ti asked, “Can you think of any reason for this change? Anything at all? It must be connected to Mustafar.”

He explained, in as much detail as he could bear, what had happened on the inferno world. He explained the landing by the molten lake, the Sith attack, the infiltration of the factory. He described the euphoria he’d felt during his ascent up the power vane and his ultimate failure to save Jade Skywalker.

When he was done he bowed his head. There was silence again until Leoli Ti said, “I only knew Master Skywalker a little, but they said she was capable of tremendous, raw power.”

“She was.” K’Kruhk tapped a claw to his chest. “I felt her dying moment on other side of the galaxy. She used it to warn us all of the Sith.”

"Then perhaps, somehow, that was what awakened him to the Force."

K'Kruhk grunted again. "It is possible. I cannot say. What we are dealing with is... unprecedented."

The thought had already occurred to Khat Lah, and while he couldn't dismiss it, he found it left him unsatisfied. To touch the ancient gods who'd rejected them was the dream of all Yuuzhan Vong. He'd hoped that his change might open the path to the Force for all his race, but if it was just a fluke instilled by a Skywalker's dying moment then he was a chance occurrence, a one-off, a freak.

"There is one other thing," he recalled. "It happened at the very start of this war, but it was... unusual. I did not know what to make of it at the time, but it happened when I was last on Zonama Sekot."

The three others stiffened. "What happened there?" asked Leoli Ti.

"Before I left for the last time, the living world appeared to me. It appeared as *you*, Master Shaper, and it touched me. It said it was giving me a gift... and a burden." He felt chilled at the memory. "For a long time, nothing seemed to change, and I'd thought I'd dreamt it all. Now... I am not sure."

The others exchanged glances, questioning and hesitant. Finally Leoli Ti looked straight at him, cleared her throat, and said, "Khat Lah, *I* am from Zonama Sekot."

He blinked. "The living world... it jumped into hyperspace and told no one its location."

"That's right. I was one of the Jedi who stayed behind on Zonama. I've been in the known galaxy for the past year, helping Nei Rin. I was told to keep Zonama's location secret from everyone, even the Jedi Council, but do I know it."

"You can take me back?"

Leoli Ti looked to K'Kruhk. The Whiphid said, "Under normal circumstances, I would forbid it. But you, young warrior, are an extraordinary case. I think you have no choice but to go back to Zonama Sekot."

The Jedi expected him to be pleased, but the prospect filled him with fear. If Sekot had appointed him with a grand mission, he'd failed it as badly as he'd failed the Jedi. If his

last experience there had been a dream or hallucination, he'd only make himself the ultimate fool.

K'Kruhk made another deep noise, close to growling. "Are you afraid, warrior?"

He opened his mouth to lie, closed it, and admitted with a nod.

"And you are ashamed of that fear." It was a statement, so he did not answer. "Let me tell you something, Khat Lah. Almost half a century before your people invaded this galaxy, I suffered a defeat unlike anything I could have imagined. The Republic I'd served betrayed itself and became a monster. My brothers and sisters in the Jedi Order were mercilessly hunted and slaughtered. I failed to protect anyone and anything and I spent decades in isolation, alone with my fear and my shame, afraid that if I did anything else I would fail yet again.

"That was a mistake, and I've regretted those days, but regret no longer rules me. I have lived too long and faced death to many times to waste my remaining years in self-pity."

His deep voice was gentle, even as he scolded. Khat Lah swallowed and looked the ancient Whiphid in the eyes. "I understand, Master *Jeedai*. With the master shaper's permission, I will go to Zonama Sekot."

"You have more than my permission." Nei Rin stepped close and touched his face. "You've done so much for me these past years. What you do now may be even more important. Go, Khat Lah, and find out what you are."

She withdrew her hand, but the sensation of her fingers on his cheek remained and left him trembling. She'd touched him just as Sekot had, at the beginning of all this.

Chapter Twenty-Four

He'd thought there were two ways to end the agony, two different lives he could take. But there was a third course before Eshkar Niin, though it took him a long time to see it. It might be harder than the others in the long run, but he'd decided to commit himself. It would, at least, bring immediate relief.

He requested a private meeting with the Emperor and was surprised to have it promptly granted. Likely Fel thought he wanted to discuss new means to snare the Sith. They met together in the Emperor's private office, where Fel greeted him warmly.

"I'm glad you're here, Master Niin. Things are progressing quickly. We've laid our trap for the Alliance, and if they take the bait this war could be over by the end of the week."

Niin hadn't expected that. "That would be... an incredible feat, Majesty. How is it possible?"

"Calixte and Maladi have laid careful clues for the Alliance's spies suggesting I'll be at Caamas three days from now. The two make an effective team, I must admit."

Niin held his tongue on that one. Maladi had confirmed to him that Calixte was, in fact, working with the Sith and had been since before the war started. He asked carefully, "Are you sure it can end the entire war?"

"Nothing is certain, but we've laid the most tempting trap imaginable. If they spring it, Fenel's Carida fleet will be ready. So will Veed's. Even if we can't force them to surrender, we can cripple their core fleets." Fel's expression

had been bending toward a smile; now it turned serious. "Once we defeat the enemy without, we must turn to the enemy within. I understand you've been considering plans to rid us of our Sith problem. Please, elaborate."

Niin hadn't expected things to go this way. If they kept on going he might be derailed from his decision, and that would only prolong the agony. Stiffly he said, "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. But I cannot help you."

The Emperor froze, still as death. His eyes, now hard, peered into Niin's. The Knight met them without flinching but he walled off his emotions in the Force.

When Fel spoke his voice was low, controlled, and angry. "Are you saying you will not help us? That you will not fulfill your duty as an Imperial Knight?"

"I am, sir."

"You swore an oath, Master Niin. To the Empire. To *me*. Are you breaking your oath?"

"Your Majesty... I no longer wish to be an Imperial Knight."

"No Knight has ever walked away before. You swore your vows for *life*."

"I know. And I am more sorry than I can ever express. But I cannot be your Knight anymore."

"Why?"

If he told the truth, admitted his treason, Fel would kill him right here. That was one way to end the agony, but not the one Niin hoped to achieve. He wanted to walk away from everything and run and hide where no emperor, empress, or Sith Lord could ever find him. It was the coward's way out, but he wasn't brave enough to take the others.

He settled with half a truth. "I am not able to serve you to the best of my abilities. I would do you no good in your fight against the Sith. It is better for us both if I step aside."

"Master Niin, I have trusted you for decades. I need a better answer than that."

"I've been doubting my role as an Imperial Knight for some time," he half-lied again. "Since before the war. Believe me, Majesty, I cannot help you in the war that lies ahead. For both our sakes, let me *go*."

He meant those final words and allowed aching honesty to show in the Force. Fel did not budge, did not blink. "In any way, does this involve my wife?"

Of course the Emperor would know, and so would Elliah. It was so hard keeping secrets from Force-users. Niin swallowed and gave another half-truth. "I'm afraid it does, Majesty."

"I will not judge you for caring about her. It would be hypocrisy. But you have known the empress for almost thirty years. After so much time, why *now*? What else is going on?"

"This war has taken a toll on me. I was not made for it."

"The war is about to end."

"One war. The next one will be worse. You said it yourself. I am sorry, Majesty. I am grievously sorry, but I cannot be your Knight anymore."

Fel shifted, bringing his right hand closer to his hip. To the lightsaber hidden beneath those robes. "Eshkar, have the *Sith* drawn you away from me?"

He'd been expecting that question and managed one more evasive truth. "I am not running to the Sith, Majesty. I swear it. All I want to do is disappear. I may stop using the Force all together."

"You'd turn your back on everything you are."

"It's been done before. Not by Imperial Knights, but by Jedi. They said Jade Skywalker's son has quit the order, even taken a new name. And your cousin—"

Fel's eyes narrowed, but his hand got no nearer to his saber. "What cousin?"

"Majesty, I have failings but I'm not a fool. The woman we took to Mandalore was your first cousin. Your uncle's only child. She left the Jedi Order after your brother's death and took a new identity, a new name. Your grandmother's name, Solo."

"She could have been an heir to an empire, or a Jedi Master. Instead she became a worthless scrap hauler. Is that what you want to be? You're *better* than that."

Niin had believed that once. His pride had allowed the Sith to trap him. "I wish that were the case. I wish it more than

anything. Maybe one day I will be... but I will not be an Imperial Knight. Or a Sith.”

Fel’s hand slackened at his side. “You disappoint me, Master Niin.”

“I disappoint myself.” Niin managed a smile, weak and bitter. He took his lightsaber from his belt and held it out. Fel glowered for a long moment, then took it. It felt like a heavy weight being lifted.

“What will you do now?” asked Fel.

“I will leave Bastion. Go far away from here. I don’t know where yet.”

“If the Empress asked for your reasons, would you be more honest with her?”

“I... do not know, Majesty.”

He moved slowly for the chamber exit. Fel’s hand wrapped tight around Niin’s lightsaber as he said, “What about your former apprentice? Would Knight Draco’s words mean anything to you?”

He hadn’t expected the Emperor to let him go so easily. “Draco is offworld on a mission.”

“He will be back on Bastion in two days. Please, stay here that long. Consider his words. I ask that from you, at least.”

Fel asked, not ordered. One little word made Niin feel light and free. The heavy agony of the past two years almost melted away.

“I suppose I can do that,” he told Fel. “But I will not linger too long.”

“If you’re not a true Knight, I wouldn’t ask you to.” The Emperor shifted his hand, and Niin’s lightsaber disappeared in the folds of his robe. “You may go now.”

Eshkar Niin, no longer Knight, never a Sith, stepped out through the heavy doors and let them close behind him. He walked down the empty hallway, stopped in the middle, closed his eyes, and drew deep breath. Perhaps he would stay two more days to see Draco one last time; he’d always been fond of the impetuous, brave young man. Or perhaps he would slip out quietly tonight and never look back. Roan Fel would be unhappy, but there was nothing he could do about it.

For the first time in his life, Eshkar Niin was bound to no one.

As captain of the Fifth Fleet's flagship, Jaius Yorub was no stranger to meetings with important personnel, but he'd never stood before the Galactic Alliance's ruling triumvirate until now. He accompanied Stazi on the admiral's insistence, which meant something very important was about to go down.

The chamber they met in looked out on Galactic City, as busy as ever, like its citizens were specifically trying to distract themselves from the war closing in. Stazi joined the other senior figures at the round conference chamber while Yorub stayed on his feet behind the admiral. Supreme Commander Petan was also on his feet, explaining his plan to the seated triumvirs.

Gial Gahan showed obvious reluctance. "What you propose carries extreme risk. I'm very hesitant to commit the forces you're asking for."

"Director Ekorian has confirmed it through multiple sources. If she weren't on Raltir she'd tell you this herself. The intelligence is *sound*," Petan insisted. "In two days, Roan Fel will be secretly meeting with members of the Chiss and the Hapans in orbit near Caamas to discuss an alliance. He will have only a light escort. If we can capture or kill Fel, we can force a peace and *end* this war! We must go with all available ships, and that includes the core fleet!"

Kol Skywalker, who'd been listening quietly until now, also stood up. He commanded immediate attention. Many beings, even within the Alliance, viewed the Jedi as the authors of this war, and many of them held Skywalker principally responsible. Yorub had never met the Jedi leader personally, and the human before him now was tall and muscular with red hair atop his head and beady blue eyes. He was probably considered handsome by human standards, but there was something clearly worn about him. He moved a little slowly, and there were bags beneath his eyes. Yorub suspected he looked older than he really was.

"The Jedi Council does *not* support this attack," Skywalker said. "Not only do our instincts suggest this is a trap, but stripping away the core fleet would leave Coruscant underdefended."

"Forgive me, but this war will not be decided by Jedi mind tricks, but by bold, decisive action!" Petan snapped.

"The Jedi are the reason we are in this war the begin with," Nu Toreena said through her Ithorian double-mouths. "We need action such as Admiral Petan suggests!"

Bail Antilles turned his uncertain eyes to the other senior commander in the room. "Admiral Stazi, what do you think?"

Yorub watched as the Duro pushed up from his chair and said, "I think it's a trap. I think we were fed the intelligence. We would be committing virtually all of our ships to this one action."

Skywalker shot a grateful look at the admiral, but kept silent. Admiral Petan scowled. "The Alliance is bleeding systems- the ones who choose to sit out the war or who actively join the Empire! We need a decisive move to achieve victory while we still can. The triumvirate was insisting this just days ago. I've brought you what you've wanted, and now you reject it."

He was a man harried and desperate. Yorub would have felt bad for him, but in that state he was all the more likely to make mistakes. If they gambled and failed, it could cost them everything. Lekhwash wouldn't has risked it. Even Stazi, a being used to bold action, was balking. That should have convinced the triumvirs, but Yorub could tell that they also felt backed into a corner.

With a heavy sigh, Antilles admitted, "What the rear admiral says is true- the Alliance *is* slowly bleeding to death. Whatever our misgivings, we must chance the opportunity we've been given. Combined fleets under Admiral Petan will make the strike at Caamas."

Gial Gahan's head bowed. His bulbous eyes drooped toward the table. "Very well, then. The majority of the triumvirate votes to go ahead. However, I will not make the vote unanimous. I cannot."

"If Caamas is a success, we will not forget this," Toreena warned.

"I hope to every god it is, Nu. Because if it *as* a trap, as the Jedi believe, then my refusal will matter little. But as a matter of conscience, I must vote against it."

Petan cleared his throat. "With respect to Triumvir Gahan's conscience, the vote has been made. The attack will go ahead under my direction. Admiral Stazi, the core of your Fifth Fleet will also participate. I'll be pulling Admiral Nict's ships back from Borleais as well."

"And will you leave *any* ships to defend our key worlds?" Stazi frowned.

"Of course. But we must concentrate our full might at Caamas. We must leave no chance that Fel will escape." Petan clearly did not appreciate sarcasm.

Yorub said a hand. "A question, sir?" Petan nodded curtly. "I've heard word of Imperial forces lurking in the former Caridan System. From there they could easily reinforce Fel at Caamas."

Petan was clearly wondering where Yorub had found that little scrap of intel, but didn't call him on it. "We've sent reconnaissance ships to Carida and found no Imperial ships of any kind."

"Are you certain?" asked Stazi. "I understand the remnants of that supernova can ruin even the best sensors."

"Yes, I'm certain," Petan hissed. "I assure you, Admiral Stazi, I am not leaping into this foolishly. I have been working with Director Ekorian and her spynet every step of the way. I am willing to stake my *life* on this."

And all of ours, Yorub thought, but he knew when to hold his tongue.

Petan turned a labored gaze to Kol Skywalker. "Will the Jedi withdraw their services from this supposed trap?"

Kol shook his head. "We pledged to help the Alliance, and you specifically, Admiral. We will be there with you at Caamas."

"I am very pleased to hear that." Petan looked back at the triumvirs. "If there's nothing left to say, I would like to adjourn this meeting. We all have a lot to do."

The triumvirs agreed and rose from their seats. Yorub kept on Stazi's wing as the admiral made a straight line for the exit.

Petan cut him off. "Thank you for your 'support.' Your core fleet can bring up the rear while *I* lead the main attack. Is that understood?"

"Completely, Admiral," the Duro said.

He quickly turned away, Yorub beside him. Stazi kept his head high and posture stiff, but Yorub knew when his admiral was crestfallen. The Sullustan muttered, "A poor winner, isn't he?"

"We'll look to keep the back door open if we can, Jaius," said Stazi. "I think we're going to need it."

It was just a string of numbers and letters, a random garble of twenty-two symbols. She'd burned it into her brain when she'd been Morrigan Corde and when she'd become Nyna Calixte she'd still carried it inside, in her most private place. It was just an outdated spy's encryption code, but it was also a bridge.

She'd last crossed it two years ago, before Admiral Keelu had launched her stymied attack on Ossus. She'd made the call from her personal comlink then, which in retrospect was foolish. She'd had no idea what kind of partner she'd been double-crossing back then and was lucky it hadn't come back on her. This time she took precautions. Using a visit to Veed as a pretext, she secured use of a private comm booth inside the defense complex's headquarters that she'd never used before. Then she input her encryption code. She had to wait several minutes before a miniature holographic bust of Kol Skywalker appeared before her.

Even as a blue electric ghost, he looked more worn than she'd remembered, more old. She wondered if the war had taken a visible toll on her as well.

"Morrigan," he said simply.

She didn't bother to correct him this time. "Hello, Kol."

"If you're calling me, it must be very important." He clearly wasn't in the mood for pleasantries or reminiscence.

"I'll keep it simple, then. Just let me talk. The Alliance has received intelligence leading them to believe that Roan Fel will be holding a secret meeting with the Chiss and Hapans in the Cirius system, over Caamas. This intelligence was fed to them carefully by my spy network and the Sith's. Caamas is a trap designed to cripple the Alliance's fleets and force them to surrender."

Even with the poor image she could see his shock. Jedi, in her experience, were poor liars.

She went on. "Your Jedi are supposed to be there, fighting with the Alliance like you usually do. The Sith intend to launch an attack on the Jedi consulate on Coruscant concurrent with the battle at Caamas. I can't say if it will be a feint, designed to lure you away, or a full-scale attack aimed at extermination. Frankly, it doesn't matter. As long as our fleets succeed at Caamas the Alliance and your Jedi are doomed."

She watched shock, acceptance, anger, and indignation pass over his face in succession. Finally he said, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Why do you think? To protect *you*. Defend Coruscant, or move all your people away, I don't care which. Just be ready, because the Sith will be coming for you in force."

"You said the Jedi are doomed no matter what happens at Coruscant."

"There are different kinds of doom. Kol, I am giving you a warning. The Sith are coming. Be ready for them. Protect yourself and protect our *son*." Her voice softened slightly. "Is Cade on Coruscant?"

"No. He is on Ossus, with the other apprentices."

"Good. The Sith don't have designs on Ossus right now."

"That you know of."

She conceded his point with a nod.

He stared at her, hard. She knew the question in his eyes. He wanted to know how close she really was with the Sith, how close the Emperor was. A part of her wanted to confess everything. She'd been their partner and their pawn since before the war. The spark became an inferno because of her. She'd never been able to justify her actions in ways Kol

Skywalker, lofty high-minded Jedi, would have approved of, but she'd never known what she was unleashing either, not until it was too late.

She could tell him that. Maybe he would hate her and maybe he'd forgive her and she didn't know which would feel worse. Instead she pressed her lips tight and told herself that, once this was all was over, she could go back to being only Nyna Calixte. It was a comforting lie.

Eventually Kol said, "You've risked a lot telling me this. I could take this to the triumvirate and Admiral Petan. I could convince them to call off the attack at Caamas and stop your trap from ever happening."

"In theory." She crossed her arms. "I know all about the situation in the Alliance, Kol. It's my *job*. The admirals and the triumvirs, they *use* you, but they do not obey your commands. Deep down most of them blame you for starting this war. Only professional decorum and unpleasant necessity hold their tongues. If you come to them with a story from a highly-placed but secret Imperial source, they'll think you're scraping for excuses not to join them at Caamas. They'll resent you all the more, but if you hold back there will be nothing they can do about it, and they'll go to Caamas anyway because desperation has blinded them. Is that accurate, Kol? Have I summed everything up?"

He glared at her across light-years. She'd said nothing incorrect and they both knew it.

"The end of this war is coming, Kol. Then a new one will begin. Protect your Jedi. Protect Cade."

"I have *always* been there for him." There was venom in his tongue, anger he'd almost never shown. "And I really thought, a long time ago, we'd *both* be there for him."

They'd had this argument so many times before. There was no point in having it again. "I am what I am, Kol. If you thought otherwise, that was your fault."

"You're right. I thought you were a better woman than you are."

That one hurt. "Kol, I—"

"Is there anything else?" he snapped.

She pressed her lips right and shook her head.

“Very well. Goodbye, Morrigan.”

The holo winked out, the connection closer. Calixte looked at her hands and saw them shaking. She pounded fists into her thighs until they hurt, then wiped away the moisture that was blurring her eyes.

Finally she stood up, composed herself, and walked out of the room. Nyna Calixte had work to do.

His last conversation had left Kol shocked and angry, and it was a poor idea to go to Admiral Petan in that condition, but there was no time to waste. He went to the defense headquarters, insisted he needed to see the supreme commander right away, and even used a few mild Force-tricks to get past the bureaucratic gatekeepers until he was in Petan’s office. Then he explained, in as much detail as he could, that a longstanding contact within Imperial Intelligence had confirmed that Caamas was a trap and that, furthermore, the Sith were going to launch a coincident attack on the Jedi consulate, which might cause untold civilian casualties on Coruscant.

When he’d spilled it all out Admiral Petan, still seated behind his desk, stared at Kol and said, “I expected better of you, Master Jedi. I truly did.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you honestly believe- because of this Force of yours- that our trap at Caamas will fail. And rather than go down with us, you pull your people out.”

“The Jedi have been with the Alliance from the start. We’ve been on the front lines of countless battles.”

“I know that. Which I why I thought you’d still honor your commitments here. I can see I was wrong.”

Kol turned hands to fists and planted them atop Petan’s desk. “I am not a liar, Admiral.”

The angry edge in his voice gave Petan brief pause. “You have conviction. I appreciate that. But your conviction used to be that the Yuuzhan Vong would help us heal damaged worlds and usher in new galactic harmony.”

“That project was sabotaged. We’ve found proof that the world brains-”

“Sabotaged by whom?”

“The Sith, clearly.”

“So you say. So your Force tell you. But where is your proof?” He put out his hands like a beggar, then pulled them back. “Nowhere. Because you *have* no proof, just like you have no proof about this Sith attack on Coruscant.”

Kol stared at the desktop. When he looked at Petan’s face it was very hard to keep his anger under control. “Will you please leave a few extra ships behind to make sure the capital is defended?”

After a thoughtful pause Petan said, “I’ll consider it.”

“Thank you. I am not lying about this, Admiral. I only want what’s best for us all.”

Petan leaned back in his chair. “Master Skywalker, I believe you. You really do believe in the power of good intentions and you really think your magic Force can show you the way to all galactic harmony.” He shook his head. “And that’s why we’re here, on the brink of annihilation. Your lofty purpose, your good intentions, your light side of the Force, what good have they done us? You Jedi thought this galaxy was a nobler place than it is. Now billions are dead because of your delusions. Your kind would be pitiable if you didn’t cause so much damage.”

Kol listened to it all with fists on the desk. It would be easy, so easy, to reach out with the Force, to grab Petan by the neck and to fully give in to his anger. If his cherished light side was only delusion there was no reason not to.

Stiffly the admiral said, “Goodbye, Master Skywalker. We’ll talk again, once the war’s been won without you.”

Kol pushed away and marched out of the room before he did something he’d regret. The words hung around him like a black cloud as he made his way back to the Jedi consulate. When other Jedi stopped and stared he realized he was broadcasting all his dark emotions in the Force, and with effort he bottled them up.

He was not as successful as he’d liked. When he retreated to a meditation chamber to calm himself, he was shortly joined by Ayen Qemar. Cautiously, the old Nautolan said, “Master Skywalker, I sense... dark thoughts.”

Kol exhaled. "There's been a change of plans, Master Qemar."

"Of what kind?"

"We'll no longer be going to Caamas. We'll be staying here." He looked into her all-black eyes. "The Sith are coming. We must be ready to defend ourselves."

A few tentacles trailing from her head twitched. "Truly, Master?"

"I trust my source implicitly." On that, if nothing else.

"Then Caamas—"

"The Alliance will attack as planned. I tried to convince Admiral Petan, but... he was not moved."

Qemar let it all sink in, then said, "Many of us could feel your return. They could feel your anger. It upset them."

"I'm sorry. I should have controlled my emotions better. It has been... hard." Since the failure of the Ossus Project. Since the start of the war. Since the death of his mother and his brother's flight. It was like everything had been stripped from him piece-by-piece. If Morrigan's predictions were accurate, the greatest loss was yet to come.

"Have faith, Master Skywalker." Qemar put a blue-green hand on his. "In the Force. In the rightness of our cause. Without it, we are nothing."

Kol nodded and tried to project solace in the Force, but it was a lie. Her words only made him think of the admiral's, and that made his heart clench in anger. It was not the harshness of Petan's words that wounded him so; it was that he could not refute them.

Even as an apprentice, Antares Draco had always radiated a sureness of himself born from his unwavering loyalty to his oath. As he stood before his emperor now it was clear his sureness had faltered, and that could only mean the worst.

"When I arrived at Berchest I announced myself go the authorities and asked for access to their entire security logs for the dates Master Niin was in Calius saj Leeloo," Draco explained. "Aside from being their main port it's also a major tourist destination. The entire city, buildings and all, has been carved out a mountain-sized rosy gem. In better

times, people came from all over the galaxy to see it. The government installed thousands of holo-cams all over Calius saj Leeloo to catch vandals defacing their city.”

“It must have taken some time to go over those records,” Elliah observed. She stood between Roan and his cousin Mohrgan, whom the emperor had also asked to be present.

“Days.” Draco’s voice was weary. “I obtained a copy of their files and set course for Bastion immediately. I reviewed them on the way back.”

“And have you found anything unusual?” asked Roan.

Draco nodded and touched the holo-projector on the emperor’s desk. He began to cycle through flattened images, each a medium-resolution crowd scene.

“Master Niin’s notes specified which of our stormtrooper units in the city had Sith hunters with them, so I began by following those.” He tapped through shots where squadrons of white-armored soldiers stood out among the crowd. Several times he pointed to a black-cloaked figure on the edge of the images. “He kept his distance at all times, but it’s clear he was monitoring their activities, just as he said.”

“Then what was unusual?” asked Elliah.

Draco tapped the controls, skipping through more captures of the stormtroopers. He finally stopped at an image of a narrow side-street with only a few pedestrians. One was clearly Eshkar Niin, the tips of his horns peeking out from beneath the shadow of his hood.

“I marked the spots where Master Niin was following the Sith, then tried to track his location during the times when he *wasn’t*,” said Draco. “This was the time-consuming part. The files the Berchest government gave me included a map of every security camera in the city, which helped trace his path. Otherwise, this would have been impossible.”

He tapped through more images, all depicting Niin as he made his way alone through the city. Sometimes he appeared in the foreground. Other times he was barely visible in the background. Always, he seemed to be alone, but Draco stopped on one image where he was on a sparsely-populated walkway that overlooked a piece of Calius saj Leeloo’s sloping carved-out cityscape.

"Master Niin said he used the Force to stalk disguised Sith," Draco explained. "If you look closely, you'll see one of them here."

Roan, Elliah, and Mohrgan leaned close to examine the image. Niin had his back turned to the camera, and Draco traced a line past the cloaked Knight to a second figure, also in hooded robes.

"I attempted to trace the Sith," Draco said. "However, immediately after this picture was taken, there was a series of disruptions on nearby holo-cams."

"He used the Force to jam them," Mohrgan said. "A common technique."

"I tried to find Master Niin on nearby holos in the same time frame," Draco said. "Nothing."

"That means nothing for sure," said Elliah.

"That's what I told myself," Draco exhaled. "Here. Let me show you. None of the holo-cams in that area were active, but as you've already seen, Calius saj Leeloo is built out of the slope of a mountain."

He tapped through several more images before he brought up that must have been taken from a camera by the slope's edge. Its view looked downward on tiers of crystal-carved buildings, onto the heads of dozens of pedestrians walking different levels.

Draco blew up one section of the image. Resolution adjusted and detail increased. The image showed a balcony that looked down on the city, apparently jutting out from a private building. On that balcony were two figures, both in robes but no longer wearing hoods.

One was clearly an Iktotchi, though Master Niin's face was obscured by the camera angle. The second being's face was clearly visible: a tentacle-faced Quarren. Though the image had no color, the Quarren's face was clearly laced with complex patterns of light and dark, like the tribal tattoos of the One Sith.

Grim silence held in the chamber. When he realized that the others were waiting for him to speak, Roan said, "This explains too much. Master Niin must be apprehended and interrogated. We must learn the depths of his treason."

Again, silence. It was what Roan had feared since Elliah conveyed her worry about Niin. Since the Knight's sudden resignation two days before, Roan had half-expected it. Niin had been carefully watched since and didn't seem to have strayed from his small apartment inside the training academy.

Still, this proof was dizzying. It asked even more questions than it answered. Perhaps Niin had been courted by the Sith for the first time at Berchest. Perhaps he'd been in league with them for years. Perhaps he'd sent those Jedi to die on Mustafar on purpose. He may have even helped the One Sith engineer this entire war.

The more he considered, the more angry Roan grew. Backstabbing from the moffs was almost expected, but his Knights had pledged themselves to him, and the Force. He looked to his cousin. "You must arrest Niin immediately. Take as many as you think necessary. He may put up a fight."

Mohrgan nodded firmly. He'd been warned to expect this. "At once, Majesty."

"I would like to come with you," Draco said.

Roan regarded the young man. "Thank you for your help in this. You should know that whatever your old master's transgressions, they do not reflect badly on you."

Draco emanated faint relief. "My request still stands, Majesty."

Roan looked to Mohrgan. "Your decision, cousin."

"Your offer's accepted, Knight Draco. Now you should come with me. We don't have time to waste."

"I will go also," Elliah said.

"There's no need to put yourself at risk," Roan said immediately.

"I am First Knight of the Empire." She put one hand on the lightsaber at her belt. "Besides, we don't know the extent of his treason. That may have been his first meeting with the Sith. It would explain why he's quit now, of all times."

"Or he may have been with them from the start. We have no way of knowing how much of a fight he'll offer."

She faced him square-on and lowered her voice. "I can talk to him, Roan. I can convince him to surrender."

“Draco can talk to him.”

“Not the way I can.” She touched him in the Force, insistent. “None of our Knights, past or present, has to die today.”

Her voice and eyes held the same quiet, steely conviction that had attracted him thirty years before. It had been impossible to refuse then; so it was now.

“Go to Niin. Talk to him if you can. But if you cannot, and Niin must be fought or put down—”

“I know what traitors deserve.” She swallowed. “I’ll do my duty, Roan.”

“We will protect Your Majesty with our lives,” Mohrgan said.

She looked away from Roan, finally, and toward the other two Knights. “I know. And like you said, we don’t have time to waste. Gather the others and we’ll go immediately.”

Four Knights and their empress drew attention as they moved through the hall of the academy. No one tried to stop them and no one asked questions. As they entered the habitat section and drew closer to Niin’s apartment, Elliah allowed herself to reach out with the Force and lightly sense for him. She found his presence where she expected it, and it felt like the same Niin as ever.

The revelation of his treason had shocked her. The Eshkar Niin she’d befriended decades ago while training at this very academy had wanted nothing more than to become an Imperial Knight, even though he was the only Iktotchi among them. She’d been the only Hapan, raised in a society that feared and despised Force-users for so long she hadn’t even known what her power was until late adolescence. She’d admired Niin for his sense of purpose because she’d been full of doubts.

Somehow Niin’s purpose had been perverted. Maybe the Imperial Knights hadn’t satisfied something inside him. Maybe his feelings for Elliah, and the knowledge they’d never be requited, had driven him to the Sith. Maybe somewhere, somehow, she could have done something to prevent this.

Maybe she still could. As they drew close to Niin's apartment Elliah gestured for the other Knights to stop.

"I'd like a chance to speak with Master Niin first," she told them.

Mohrgan shook his head. "With all respect, Majesty, there's no telling how Niin might react. We should make a show of force."

"If we panic, he'll be more likely to fight. Mohrgan, I have to talk to him."

"I'll go with you, Majesty," Draco said. "I insist. I can talk to him too. Master Niin taught me more than anyone."

She felt the aching in him, the need to know how far Niin had fallen and whether it was in any way his fault. It was a perfect echo of her own.

"Very well," she breathed. "Knight Draco, come with me. Everyone else, wait outside the door."

"He'll feel our presence," Mohrgan reminded.

"I know. And hopefully he'll appreciate our offer to take him in peaceably." Elliah paid a hand on Draco's scarlet-armored forearm. "Let's go."

They stepped up to the door together and rang the buzzer like they were normal visitors. Mohrgan and the other Knights stood back without bothering to conceal themselves. When the door opened Eshkar Niin was there. He was dressed, incongruously, in his own red armor. His eyes were very tired, as though he'd been jarred from bad sleep, but his posture was stiff and his voice strong.

"Master Niin," Elliah said, "May we come in?"

His eyes shifted from her and Draco to the Knights behind them, then back. Whatever he thought or felt, he kept it concealed in the Force.

"Come," he said, and stepped back.

Elliah followed, Draco right behind her. They squared off against Niin in the small foyer of his apartment.

"I was ready to leave Bastion today," said Niin. "You didn't have to bring Knights to expel me."

"This is not an expulsion." Elliah took a breath. "Master Niin, we have proof that you consorted with a Sith on Berchest. You will be taken in for questioning."

Niin showed no surprise, nothing. "How did you find out?" he asked.

"I was tasked to stop at Berchest and review their security files," Draco said. "It took great effort... But I found proof of your meeting with a Quarren Sith."

Niin nodded slightly. "Darth Maleval, he was called."

"You admit to it then," Elliah said.

"There's no point to deny it." His voice was empty, blank.

"Have you met with Maleval before?" Elliah asked. No response. "Have you met *other* Sith like that, Eshkar?"

The ex-Knight closed his eyes, tilted his horned head back, blew breath at the ceiling. She sensed the first emotion from him today: relief.

"Master Niin!" Draco snapped. "Explain yourself! Please!"

Niin's eyes creaked open and set on the young man. "Ah, Knight Draco... You were... an enjoyable apprentice. Always testing me, even as I tested you..."

"Master Niin!" He put a hand on his lightsaber. "Answer the empress' question!"

"I found the Sith on Mandalore," he said. "There were two of them, including the one we call Darth Nihl, masquerading as Yaga Auch's servants. But they were the masters. They're the masters of everything."

Two years. Two years he'd been working with them, and Elliah had never suspected until the end. "Did the Sith start this war? Did they ruin the Ossus Project?"

"They did. And they pushed the Empire to war with the Alliance. Moff Calixte was their main tool for that."

Elliah felt Draco's surprise. They'd suspected Calixte of subterfuge at the war's start. Draco and Niin had investigated her, but their search had found only dead ends. Reluctantly, Roan had allowed the woman onto the Moff Council. It was another mistake her husband would berate himself for.

"Why didn't you say this two years ago?" Draco asked. "Why did you lie to us?"

The sound that escaped Niin's throat was a cry and a laugh. "You understand now, don't you? You have to! The Sith have *already* won! They are more powerful than us, *smarter* than us. They created a war that could only end with their

victory, just like the Clone Wars. Darth Krayt is a genius. And our emperor... he is *nothing* to Krayt.”

Draco drew his lightsaber and ignited it. “We will defeat Darth Krayt and you’ll help us by telling everything you know.”

Sadly, tiredly, Niin shook his head. “No, my apprentice. I will not.”

Elliah had only faced one Sith in battle, on Hapes thirty years ago. Roan, Treis, and Mohrgan had done most of the fighting, but she still vividly remembered their opponent’s visceral anger and the way it had fueled his fighting. She’d thought all Sith were like that, powerful storms on verge of breaking.

She was, therefore, caught totally off-guard when Niin raised both hands and unleashed bursts of blue Force-lightning. Draco was faster; he shoved his Empress aside and raised his lightsaber to catch the lightning. Some crackled against his blade, but more leapt past it to snap at his face and singe his hair.

Mohrgan and the other Knights were through the door in an instant. They charged with sabers raised. Niin stopped two with a one-handed burst of lightning. He slashed air with his other hand, Force-propelling items from his nearby desk into the air. Mohrgan staggered and protected his face with raised forearms.

By then Draco had recovered and Elliah had ignited her own saber. Niin interposed another Knight between him and them, and released another burst of lighting that made the young man scream. Swiftly Niin grabbed the Knight’s saber-arm by the wrist, twisted it precisely, and kicked the man’s leg’s out beneath him. The Knight fell hard on the carpet, but his lightsaber was in Niin’s hand now, blazing bright.

Instead of attacking Niin backflipped over a sofa. Another Knight leaped over it but Niin caught his lightsaber as it fell downward and Force-pushed the man while he was still in mid-air. Elliah watched as the red-armored body tumbled through his apartment window. Glass exploded outward and the Knight kept falling.

Mohrgan, Elliah, and Draco charged as one, but Niin lifted the sofa into the air and threw it in their faces. It slammed into them, soft but heavy, and they were forced to cleave through it with vertical slashes. When they'd carved the thing into four smoking pieces Niin was gone. Elliah hurried to the broken window and stuck her head out. She caught sight of Niin sliding down the building's slanted wall, using the Force to arrest his impact as his feet hit the ground.

Without stopping to look up at them, Niin sprinted away.

Elliah nearly jumped out the window after him. Draco lifted one boot onto the sill, ready to vault through, but Mohrgan called on the to stop.

"We'll alert all security," he said. "He can't get far."

He'd already injured two Knights. He could surely defeat more. "Sound the alarm," she told Mohrgan, "But get us a landspeeder. We're going after him ourselves."

There was no agony anymore, no indecision. The choice had made itself in a way he'd never expected. Eshkar Niin was grateful beyond words, and he wondered if the Force itself had played a guiding hand.

He escaped the academy grounds as quickly as he could. The place was protected against outside invaders but Niin had lived there for thirty years and he knew how to slip out unnoticed. From there he could lose himself in the sprawling streets of Ravelin, but he knew they'd still pursue him. He could feel Elliah and Draco in the Force, as determined to pursue him as bissip hounds on a scent.

He withdrew from their touch and withdrew from the Force. He would be harder to track this way and, more, he did not want to touch them. His betrayal had hurt them personally and their minds, which he'd known so long in the Force, emanated pain from fresh wounds.

It was easy to steal a landspeeder if you were determined to do so. Niin didn't even need the Force. He simply found a vehicle in a side alley with its driver about to enter. It only took blow to the back of her head. He didn't even need to use the Force. From there he nudged the speeder into Ravelin's midday traffic and made for the nearest launch pad.

He knew several small, hyperspace-capable vessels were parked at the chief Imperial News Network bureau at the city center. His red armor and a few touches of the Force would get him into a ship and off-planet, unless a wide alert had been issued for his arrest. He doubted that; Fel would not rush to admit that one of his most senior Knights had turned traitor. The emperor was trapped by pride as much as Niin had been.

He would escape Bastion, find the One Sith, and give them his full loyalty. It was the only option left and he did not hesitate, but a question nagged at him: Would the Sith accept him? Would the Sith execute him instead for allowing himself to be exposed?

It would be different if he'd killed Mohrgan Valtor, Draco, or the empress. Even during the fight in his apartment, when he'd been buoyed by clarity, he'd balked to kill them. Mohrgan perhaps he could have done; he'd worked with the Emperor's cousin but never counted him a close friend. Draco and Elliah he'd cared for, *still* cared for. He admitted that to himself. Darth Maleval had told him that the true test of a Sith's devotion came in killing something he loved. Only then could he be free of his past self.

Eshkar Niin was not yet free. That realization settled and sobered him as he parked his landspeeder at the INN headquarters complex. His scarlet armor got him through the first checkpoint, just as he'd expected. The Force got him through the second, and then compelled building security to let him onto the landing pad. An emergency, he told them. Emperor Fel would be furious if they refused his Knight.

As he hurried through the hallway and rode the lift up to the rooftop landing pad Niin allowed himself to touch the Force fully and to be touched. He sensed Mohrgan, Draco, and Elliah, still in pursuit and getting close. They sensed him too and poured their feeling through the tenuous Force-link. From Mohrgan he felt cold determination and wounded pride. From Draco there was shame and confusion. From Elliah, a regret that was almost physically painful.

He recoiled into himself. The lift doors opened, revealing a rooftop landing pad and two small courier shuttles. The

towers of Ravelin spread in all directions and wind blew cold and fast through the skyscrapers.

“Will you be needing anything else, Master Knight?” asked the security guard who’d escorted him. He’d already given Niin the shuttle’s entry code.

“Nothing,” Niin said, and with a push of the Force he knocked the guard back into the lift tube and sent it shooting down.

He could feel them coming for him, so close. Niin sprinted across the pad until he reached the shuttle and beckoned the ramp to open. Before he could enter the ship he felt three minds blazing like novas in the Force and heard the roar of their airspeeder.

He sprinted for the ramp but they fell from the sky and landed on every side of him: Elliah off his right shoulder, Draco off his left, Mohrgan dead in front, blocking his path.

“You will come with us, Master Niin!” Mohrgan shouted over the howling wind. They all clasped humming sabers in both hands.

Niin withdrew his own weapon and ignited it. The weapon vibrated, reassuring in his palm. A second wave of clarity rolled over him, as it had in the apartment. They would not let him go. If he surrendered they would learn the truth and kill him for treason. He would have to fight. He would have to kill them.

And in doing so he would kill the man he was and become Sith at last.

His last doubts vanished. All the choices he’d made had led him here. Everything seemed so *easy*. This could only be what the Force had meant for him.

Without a word, Niin lunged forward. He let Mohrgan get the first swing in, a high horizontal blow. Niin ducked beneath it, but instead of thrusting he rammed his horned head into Mohrgan’s armored gut. The Knight grunted and tried to spin back, leftward, away from Niin’s lightsaber. Niin placed his free hand on Mohrgan’s chest and summoned a burst of Force-lighting. Anger became energy that sent pain spasming through the human’s body.

Elliah and Draco were on him. Niin spun away from Mohrgan and hefted his saber in two hands to block. Draco was on him first with a flurry of fast blows. They pushed him closer to the landing pad's edge but Niin could feel his apprentice's hesitation. The young man's mind refused to fully accept his master's betrayal. He didn't have the resolve to kill Niin, and that doomed him.

Niin deflected blows with deliberate clumsiness. He let his saber drop low and gave Draco an opening to drive home a killing blow but the young man hesitated. He couldn't bring himself to strike and let his body shift off-balance. Niin flicked his saber upward, skirting across the breast of Draco's armor. Its completed arc would cut through Draco's face, slicing brain matter to kill him, but an invisible hand grabbed him and pulled him back. As Elliah Force-threw him back across the landing pad Draco let out a cry and clutched his face. Niin may have taken out the man's right eye, he wasn't sure.

Elliah faced him now, and he sensed Mohrgan recovered and coming on his flank. Mohrgan would not hesitate. He realized, with a shock, Elliah would not either. Despite their years of friendship, despite the regret and pain and self-reproach that blazed off her in the Force, she had resolved to kill Eshkar Niin.

But then, she'd be a poor empress if she could not do her duty.

He attacked her first. His lightsaber cracked against hers in heavy blows, one after another. Elliah deflected every one and slipped in jabs where she could, but Niin ably dodged. She was holding him here, keeping his distracted as Mohrgan came around from behind. In their years together they'd sparred many times and knew each other's weaknesses and strengths.

His Sith teachers had taught him a new kind of strength, one she did not know. He unleashed another burst of Force-lighting, one that she could only defend against. Just as Mohrgan came down on him Niin ducked, rolled over one shoulder, and came up on the man's flank. With a one-handed swipe Mohrgan blocked the counterattack, grabbed

Niin's free wrist with his other hand, and stepped so close they could spit in each other's eyes. With a snarl, Niin snapped his forehead into Mohrgan's. An Iktotchi's skull was thicker than a human's. Mohrgan staggered and loosened his grip. Niin wrenched his wrist free, reached out, and grabbed Mohrgan's throat in a chokehold. As he squeezed down he funneled more anger into blue lightning that jumped across the man's face, drawing a scream of agony.

Then Elliah was one him. He threw Mohrgan's body, sent it skidding across the ramp, and turned to face the empress. He parried her attacks ably, knowing where each would land. Using the darkness inside he began to counterattack, faster and harder than before. Elliah struggled to defend herself and was forced back, step after step. He could feel dread take hold of her, the realization that after all this time, after all they'd been through, after all they thought they'd understood about each other, Eshkar Niin was more than his empress could have ever imagined, and now he would kill her.

Now he would become more than he'd ever been.

"I am your empress, Niin!" she cried desperately. "Remember your vows!"

With one great swing he nearly knocked the lightsaber out of her hands. Her arm was pushed outward and she struggled to pull it in. Niin had his opening and he did not hesitate. A diagonal slash cleaved the empress through the abdomen, leaving a black-scorched line from shoulder to hip. He saw her face- that beautiful face- contort and slacken. Her saber fell from her hand. She wavered on her feet. Niin adjusted his wrist, angled his saber forward, and drove it through her sternum.

He watched her eyes as life left them.

A voice beside him screamed, "I'll kill you!"

Niin pulled his saber from her breast and deflected Draco's first attack. A fresh black scar slashed from cheekbone to eyebrow, narrowly missing the eye itself. It added to the young man's savage snarl as he rained down attacks so strong even Niin, at one with the Force's most primal power as never before, struggled against them.

“You monster!” Draco howled.

“I can feel your anger, apprentice?” Niin grunted. “Can you feel its *power*?”

“You are *not* my Master!”

“You could be so much more than a Knight, Draco.” Niin keep desperately parrying. He could tell he was being backed toward the platform’s edge.

“I will never be Sith!”

“But the power! You can feel it, I know you can!”

The words made Draco falter, as he knew they would. Niin saw his opening and made an upward slash toward Draco’s right side. The young man saw it coming, and instead of trying to jump away he fell forward. Their breastplates smashed and his free hand grabbed Niin’s wrist, pinning the lightsaber to one side.

Niin snapped his head back for another brutal head-butt, then froze. Pain speared through his abdomen, pain like he’d never felt.

Draco released him. Niin staggered back and watched a sizzling white blade withdraw from the center of his chest. The world swam and darkened. He looked upward and saw Draco staring at him, scarred face still twisted in a snarl.

Beneath a human’s sternum lay his heart, the drum that beat lifeblood through his body. Not so Iktotchi. Draco didn’t know that. Draco was expecting him to fall dead.

The wound in his chest was not immediately fatal, but it *hurt*. Niin could barely stand. He staggered and felt strong wind tip him back. Ravelin’s cityscape spread out far below.

It should not have ended this way. He had murdered the woman he loved and with her his old self. He had not sacrificed everything to become Sith, just to die moments later. It was cruel. It was wrong. Anger broke through the pain. Niin dropped his lightsaber, extended his hands, and flung out raw energy. Draco was ready for to this time and caught most of it on the body of his saber. Niin howled- in pain, in frustration, in defeat- and felt the energy crackle off his body, tearing off his cells, funneling all his dying anger at the young Knight who continued to stand firm, in defiance of all the great dark power Niin commanded.

His whole vision blazed with painful, crackling light. His body became weak; a great wind took him. Niin tilted back, off the edge of the landing pad, fell in a ball of blue lightning, down, down, hundreds of meters toward the city streets.

Then his corona of bright hate winked out, leaving a greater dark than he'd ever known.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Khat Lah had spent most of his life on Zonama Sekot, but when he returned to it this time it was like experiencing the place anew.

He landed without fanfare. Leoli Ti did not take him to see any other Jedi, though he briefly met with the priestess Komral. She gasped in astonishment as Khat Lah told his tale and agreed to keep word of this private. They met in her dimly-lit damutek in the middle of the night, but he thought he saw tears of joy in her eyes.

After that, all they could do was wait. Khat Lah wandered out of the Middle Distance's valley, into the surrounding forests. He felt himself drawn to them. The Yuuzhan Vong revered it as a place where natural life found perfect harmony, the recreation of its parent world Yuuzhan'tar. Khat Lah had never *felt* that harmony until now. Though the forest was still dark and he could see little but the black shafts of the bora trees he knew when there was moss growing in the mulch beneath his feet. He knew when the shadowed tree beside him hosted sleeping mammals cuddled together in their nest and he knew when the sound of rustling branches far above was not wind but avians taking flight. He could not explain how he knew, only that he knew. He wondered if Jedi were as constantly surprised by life as he was.

Eventually Khat Lah found a glade faintly gleaming from the cold blue light of the gas giant Zonama swung around. He looked up at the distant blue marble, then at its reflection

on the shallow lake. He found a stone to perch himself on, closed his eyes, and savored the sensations of life all around. He wondered if Jedi got used to all these things, the way bodies adjusted to gravity or eyes modulated to light-levels. He wondered if Jedi learned to ignore all this life, and it seemed to him a shame if they did.

He did not know how long he spent there on the rock, but it was still dark when he opened his eyes and saw a human girl standing in the lake, boot-soles resting atop still water. Her long hair was sandy blond and she wore the pale tunic of a Jedi apprentice. Her eyes were questioning. Even in the dim blue planetlight she seemed brighter and clearer than her surroundings.

"I have come a long way to find you," Khat Lah told Sekot.

"And I've waited a long time for you to be here." The voice seemed familiar somehow.

"It wasn't a dream, then. You appeared to me and touched me. You gave me gift and a burden."

"In ways you're only beginning to understand."

"You gave me the *Force*."

"All life is the Force and the Force is all life. The Yuuzhan Vong were merely stripped of their ability to use it by my ancestor, the original Yuuzhan'tar."

"Because we turned against you and became savage. Because we gave ourselves fully over to what the *Jeedai* call the dark side."

"Your people embraced their worst destructive impulses. You would have damaged the very nature of the Force so Yuuzhan'tar cast you out, like a disease patient put under quarantine."

"And for centuries... millennia... we wandered, lost. We found this place. The *Jeedai* showed us the way home, and then... Have you found a way back to the Force? For all of us?"

The young human smiled awkwardly. "I'm not sure of that yet. I hope so. You were a test, Khat Lah."

"But... why me? If you wanted a Yuuzhan Vong amongst *Jeedai*, why not Nei Rin or a shaper? Why not Besh Lah or Vua Yaght?" He struggled to get out the names.

"More than any of them, Khat Lah, you yearned to be more than what you were."

He looked at his hands. "Now I am. But my... awakening... it did not happen until a year after you touched me."

"I only started the process. Khat Lah, you may have heard stories of Jedi Knights who were stripped of the Force."

"Yes. Yes I have." He realized there was something in the conjured face, as well as its voice, that he knew. "But they rediscovered it by themselves."

"You had to do the same. Did you face a great trial, Khat Lah? Were you left alone with yourself and forced to find your inner courage, and inner peace?"

He knew that face now. Sekot was appearing to him as Jade Skywalker as she'd been, perhaps fifty years ago. A small, slim teenage girl with grief behind her and grief ahead of her, but resolve to face it.

The realization made him tremble. "I did," he creaked. "I had to save... to save the Master *Jeedai* Skywalker. There was a moment when I felt that I'd given up everything. All my shame. My wounded pride. The need to avenge my comrades. Even my desire to touch the Force, to know and use it like the *Jeedai*. I accepted that I was small and could only do little things, but I was *happy* to be able to play any part in the will of the Force. It didn't matter that I was blind and deaf to it. I was happy just to exist."

Jade's face smile gently. "Then there you found the Force."

"But I failed," he hissed. "You... Master Skywalker died. I could not save her. The *Jeedai* say she became a beacon in the Force as she died. She reached out to them on all sides of the galaxy."

"I know," Sekot said softly. "I felt it too."

"I knelt beside her as she died. I thought that perhaps *that* was the moment where the Force touched me."

Sekot seemed to consider. "They say the Force itself conceived the Skywalkers. They've always had power and destinies beyond normal Jedi. Maybe her power really did push you along. I can't say. But your awakening began when I touched you three years ago. Since then you've been discovering it yourself, with some help along the way."

"Then can you do this for every other Yuuzhan Vong?"

"I could."

"But you have not?"

"You are the first of your kind to naturally touch the Force in eons. To be honest, Khat Lah, I was worried your power might bring out the worst in your species. I thought you might become a dark power in the Force that puts the Sith to shame."

"But I have not. You can see that."

"You haven't yet, but you've barely begun to understand your power. You can sense the Force, but can you use it?"

"I... do not know how," he admitted.

"Then you still have much to learn."

He exhaled. "Answer me something else then. The *Jeedai* and Sith, no matter their species, all speak with the Force through the tiny beings in their cells, midi-chlorians. I have no midi-chlorians, but I can touch the Force."

"The Force isn't midi-chlorians. Midi-chlorians are just the conduit the Force moves through. I've given you the power to touch the Force without them, just like the Yuuzhan Vong of old. The power you draw goes directly to you. If anything your connection is cleaner, deeper than the Jedi's. That connection allowed the ancestors of the Yuuzhan Vong to achieve a communal mind and a connection with Yuuzhan'tar unknown to the peoples of this galaxy. It also allowed them to be corrupted beyond anything seen elsewhere. The Force is a great thing, Khat Lah, but it is also dangerous beyond measure."

It was all so much. He'd spend days, weeks trying to understand. "What will become of me now?"

"That's your choice, isn't it? You can contemplate the Force here on Zonama for a time. There are Jedi here who, I'm sure, will be happy to train you in your new awareness. And many Jedi choose a monastic life."

"I cannot hide in a cave. I am a Yuuzhan Vong warrior."

"Are you?" Jade's eyes bored into his, so curious.

"I... I believe I still am."

"If you won't stay here, what will you do?"

"The *Jeedai* are struggling to survive against the Sith."

"And you would help them?"

"I do not know how, but yes..." His head dipped in shame. "I have spent too long cowering in indecision. I was not a warrior then. I was a coward."

"And now you are not." Sekot's voice held restrained pride.

He nodded, but hesitation remained. "I would do the will of the Force.... but I do not always know what it is."

"No one does. You can find it by finding peace in yourself. Some find peace in contemplation, but you Khat Lah... you are a warrior. And there's a great war being waged, right now." The face of Jade Skywalker smiled. It was young, bright, and filled him with hope. "Go to meet it, Khat Lah. You have so much left to learn."

Marin Solo had spent a lot of time on starships and some of them had left a mark on her heart. *Fast Start*, of course, was one of them. So was the ancient refitted X-wing fighter she'd travelled half the galaxy with as a Jedi ranger. Her father's ship was the first one she'd known intimately, and when she sat behind the controls of *Starlight Champion* after decades apart it felt like no time had passed.

Despite its unusual design, with long wings forming a diagonal slant when in flight, *Champ* wasn't a ship most beings looked at twice. It was too old and dowdy for that. This made it ideal to enter Randon's capital. From orbit, Randon was a temperate world with an equal mix of ocean-blues, forest-greens and desert-browns. According to Marin's sensors, the capital was located on the coastline of the equatorial continent.

Before they descended into the atmosphere, Marin flicked on the comm and hailed her uncle. After a moment Mekk's gruff voice said, "We're sitting pretty behind their moon. You going in?"

"Just got clearance," Marin confirmed. "You know the signal if we run into trouble. Stand by until then."

"Could be a while. When're your *buir* showing up?"

There had been a short-notice change of plans, and her father was set to arrive by himself in a third ship. "He'll give us two hours to scope out the capital."

“Understood.” Mekr sounded annoyed. He was probably wondering why he’d shown up early when he might not do anything here at all.

“You’re getting paid a flat rate regardless,” Tamar reminded him from the seat beside Marin.

“Yeah, and I’m grateful. Might poke around the other planets in this system while I’m waiting. To keep the boredom away.”

“We might need fast extraction,” Marin reminded.

“Relax. I’m just a micro-jump away.” Mekr killed the link.

Marin glanced at her mother, who shrugged helplessly. Then she gripped the controls and dropped *Starlight Champion* toward the planet.

Like most big urban agglomerations, Randon’s capital kept its spaceport on the edge of the city. In this case it was on the northern coast, and Marin made sure to come in from the south and swoop low over the city. It was a mix of modern transparisteel towers rising high above patches of older, traditional structures of functional duracrete or midbrick. She marked the government district as close to the coast, a fortified and walled-off mini-city of its own with private landing pads and separate building complexes for different departments. She also spotted several shields generators and defensive canon emplacements. They looked of recent installation.

The capital was big enough they had to rent a landspeeder to take them into the city center. Marin and Tamar were in civilian clothes and could easily, and rightly, be taken as a middle-aged woman and her elderly parent. They sat in the landspeeder’s back seats. Gen Konar had donned the trim outfit of a personal driver and piloted the speeder through the capital. His apprentice, the young Zabrak Soht Lenar, had joined Nat in renting speeder-bikes that allowed them to travel ahead independently.

As they neared the city center shining skyscrapers loomed above them, incongruous with streets that were often old, narrow, and pressed on all sides by squat functional buildings. The lanes were thick with landspeeders and trucks, the pavements filled with pedestrians who seemed to Marin

to be going about their business in an unhurried fashion. I didn't look like a world with the Imperial navy breathing down its neck, but it was, and that worried Marin.

Tamar pointed to one particular skyscraper. "That one's close to the government district. If it has an observation deck we'll get a great look down."

"You're sure?"

"I marked it on the way in."

Marin reached forward and tapped Konar's shoulder. "Oh, driver, can you let us off there? We'd like to do some sightseeing."

"Understood," Konar said and swerved toward the tower. Marin couldn't tell if he was playing a role or if the Jedi was naturally humorless.

Before getting off Marin asked him, "We'll stake out here. What's your plan?"

"I'll park the speeder and see if I can get close to the government district on foot."

"With your Jedi powers?" asked Tamar.

Konar nodded stiffly.

They left the landspeeder and left him to it. Sure enough, the skyscraper had an observation deck with public access. The whole place looked and smelled new. Randon had done well for itself over the past decade. It wasn't going to risk losing this in a war.

As the lift tube shot them up ninety-some storeys to the top, Marin leaned over and whispered, "Mom... why are you doing this?"

Tamar kept her eyes head ahead. "I'm getting paid for this too, you know."

"I do know. But I feel like the actual Jedi could handle this sort of job by themselves."

"Then why are *you* here?"

Marin exhaled. "It's a little different for me."

"Yes. You have family and you're not with them." Tamar hooked her arm around her daughter's. "All I've got is right here. Where else am I supposed to be? They don't make retirement homes for old Mandos and even if they did, I wouldn't be welcome."

She said it flippantly, without a trace of hurt. Marin remembered how, when she'd been growing up, Tamar had been separated from Mandalore and her family, again because of an Auchs. That life had frustrated Tamar in ways teenage Marin, embroiled in her own dilemmas, had only dimly understood. She sensed none of it from her mother now. Maybe it was the acceptance that came with age. Maybe it was, as Tamar had said, she had her family with her this time, so it really wasn't exile at all.

The lift shuddered to a halt and they stepped out onto the observation deck. A transparisteel wall curved in a full circle around them, giving an avian's view of the entire city. It was mid-morning and thin with tourists, which meant Marin and Tamar could easily claim spots close to the windows and out of earshot. Tamar took out a pair of macrobinoculars and began scanning the government complex.

Marin reached beneath her hair and tapped her earpiece. "You there, guys? We've got a great view here."

"I'm on a rooftop, five levels up, at the southeast corner of the complex," said Nat.

Tamar, who wore her own earpiece and heard everything, said, "I see you. Can you see the landing complex from where you are? It's at dead center."

"I can," said Nat. "Looks like... one Sorosuub shuttle, a couple Koensayr scout craft with local markings."

"I'm also seeing another hangar complex, northwest corner," Tamar said. "Ground-level, with retractable blast doors over the top. Say, forty meters long, thirty deep. Roof's closed right now. You probably can't see it from your angle."

"Sound like they could fit something decent in there and keep it quiet," muttered Nat.

"I'm near that position," said Konar. "The checkpoint to get inside the government district is heavily guarded."

"You'd expect that, wouldn't you?" Nat said. "You could try going over. I don't see any sensors at the top of the wall."

"I do see people in those defensive turrets," Tamar said. "Probably double as watchtowers."

"Seems a little extensive," muttered Soht Lenar.

"Konar, maybe you should ask around and see if this kind of security is normal," suggest Marin.

"Agreed. Rawk, I recommend holding position. Soht, try to find me."

"Understood, Master."

There was a pause. Marin whispered, "Anybody sense anything Sith yet?"

"Thankfully no," said Konar.

"Me neither," added Soht.

"Then maybe we'll get lucky."

"We'll find out," said Nat. "Look up."

Marin and Tamar looked up. They saw a small courier shuttle with markings for the Galactic Alliance Fourth Fleet drop straight from the sky, fire its repulsors, and drop onto an unoccupied landing pad in the heart of the government complex.

"Now it's over to Dad," Marin whispered.

Tamar nodded. "We'll see what he shakes out."

Sniffing out a secret pact between Randon and the Empire was never going to be easy, even if you sent a group of Jedi, ex-Jedi, and almost-Jedi. Since they were technically part of the Alliance, the Randoni would have made a plan to keep things very, very secret.

A surprise was needed to shake up their plan, and Arlen decided to provide it. Marin had argued against his going in alone, but Arlen had insisted. If the Randoni officials were lying, he was best-suited to find it out. Further, as an old man, the Randoni would feel less threatened by him than a tall, fit, visibly combat-ready knight like Gen Konar.

Using a borrowed Fourth Fleet shuttle, he showed up unannounced with authorization from Admiral Slossar to prove he was an official representative from the Alliance on urgent business. When he'd dropped out of hyperspace over Randon he'd contacted the planetary government and requested to meet with their head of state as soon as possible. Even with his official credentials he'd been given a run-around, but it was hard to tell if they were hiding something or if it was just the usual bureaucratic obfuscation.

Finally, they let him land. Arlen came alone. When he stepped onto the landing pad in his brown robes his greeting party displayed visible shock. He'd neglected to mention the Jedi part.

The Randoni were all human, with tanned skin and incongruously bright gold hair. Their leader looked to be middle-aged, and he clearly didn't have experience hiding emotion from Force-users. Despite his polite smile, he bled vague anxiety in the Force.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," the man lied. "I had no idea the admiral was sending a Jedi."

Arlen smiled and lied. "The Jedi and fleet command are on good terms nowadays."

"And you are, ah—"

"Master Arlen Fel," he supplied.

That elicited more surprise. Arlen had never been as important as Lowbacca or Kol Skywalker, but his last name assured he was known galaxy-wide.

"It's a great honor to meet you," the man said. "I am Deputy Chief Administrator Calbee. Please, come this way."

"Are the Chief Administrator and President occupied?" Arlen had given himself a brief rundown of Randoni government structure on the way here.

"Oh, no. The president is finishing an important meeting with the trade council. He'll meet with you shortly."

"I hope so. I have very important news."

As Calbee led him into the building he said, "What sort of news, if I may ask?"

"I've been told to speak directly with the president before revealing that."

"I see. We'll make sure you're quite comfortable while you wait, Master Jedi."

Calbee showed him to a waiting room that doubled as an atrium. Sunlight fell through a glass ceiling onto cultivated flowers, green fronds, and streams of running water. The deputy administrator left him with two blank-faced guards. Arlen sensed less anxiety from them and more dim confusion. Pretending to admire the flowers he reached out further with the Force. This building was full of hundreds of beings, and

in most he detected only the unenthusiastic professionalism of government workers.

But there were small spots of agitation. He felt one of those spots drawing physically nearer, until the atrium doors opened. Calbee entered, followed by a man in violet robes and a handful of trailing aides.

"Greetings, Master Jedi. I am President Polampar."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Arlen extended a hand. Polampar took it. Beneath the president's smile was restrained panic. His mind was whirling to rearrange pieces of something but Arlen couldn't tell what.

Polampar withdrew his hand. "I've been told you bring a special message from Admiral Slossar."

"That's correct. I'm afraid we've just learned that the Empire has immediate plans to take this world by force."

The president's eyes widened. "Oh, dear. Can you tell me more, Master Jedi?"

Arlen did. It was something he, Lowbacca, and Admiral Slossar had cooked up, highly plausible but vague in all the right places. If Polampar was making a deal with the Imps right now, this was designed to make him suspect a double-cross.

When Arlen was done with his fabrication, which might not even be a lie, Polampar licked his lips and said, "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Master Jedi. I will look into this right away. Please, remain here and get back to me shortly. I will bring you refreshments and make sure you're comfortable."

"I'm short on time," Arlen said. "If this will be a while I'd best be on my way back to Kashyyyk."

"Oh, no. No time at all. Please, sit down and be comfortable."

Polampar gave a respectful bow, then hurried out of the room with his entourage trailing behind him.

Whatever Arlen had started, it had started. Which meant it was over to Marin and Nat now.

There were a lot of things that gave Bantha a bad feeling about this mission: the limited intel, the lack of local help,

Arlen going alone most of all. But then, as Droo had gently pointed out a few months back, everything was giving him a bad feeling after Mustafar. She was right. Since then desire to escape it all warred constantly with his sense of duty, and there was no resolution in sight. At least Marin was going through the same dilemma.

Whatever Arlen's arrival had sparked inside the government complex, it didn't seem to cause that much activity from the outside. Konar reported that the security checkpoints were operating as usual, with no change in procedure or staff. Marin said that two police cruisers had landed at the complex and discharged staff who quickly went inside, but that could mean anything.

Bantha, meanwhile, had gone to work on something else. That closed-roof hangar on the northwest side of the complex was suspicious, and there was a way to tell what was inside without trying to infiltrate it. Bantha mounted his speeder bike and quickly made his way to buildings that afforded a better view of the hangar. Several had security holo-cams on their exteriors, and while Bantha was no expert slicer, he bet he didn't need to be.

Still mounted on his speeder bike, he found a camera pointed toward the government complex, stabilized his ride, and went to work. Some of the cameras were small things that fed their data directly to a computer core inside the building, but this one seemed to transmit data remotely, which meant it should have a processor built in. Sure enough, Bantha opened its access hatch, identified its processor and memory card, and removed the latter.

His tampering with private property may not have gone unnoticed, so Bantha quickly dropped his speeder to the streets, put distance between himself and the building, and finally found an empty alley in which to rest. The datapad he'd brought with him was compatible with the memory card and he hunched over its screen to review the footage. Like most private security cams, this one couldn't record much, only three standard days' worth. Bantha sped through the recording at the fastest speed possible and waited impatiently as the still cityscape image flickered in and out of clouds, fell

dark at night and grew bright under the sun, all the while mixed the hyper-fast buzz of air and speeder traffic.

When it came he almost missed it. Bantha rewound the recording, then replayed at twice-normal speed. When he saw the ship lowering itself into the northwest hangar he froze and magnified. The image blew up without improving resolution, but he could find familiar form in its oversized pixels.

He knew the ship type: a Sienar *Nune*-class shuttle with a tall narrow body and aerial maneuvering fins on the bottom that folded up for landing. It wasn't exclusively used by the Imps, but they used it a lot.

Still sitting in the back alley, he took out his comlink and explained his find for the group. It was important but it wasn't proof of anything, and his response was thoughtful silence.

To fill it Bantha asked, "Anything on Arlen?"

"Nothing we can tell," said Konar.

"Anything through the Force?"

"I don't know," Marin said. "What do you think?"

The woman had gone decades with voluntarily touching the Force, and while Bantha admired her fortitude, his gut told him that one day she'd have to break that habit. He reached out for his former master and vaguely felt his familiar presence. "He seems... all right to me. Don't know what that means, though. Do you think?"

"Hold on," Tamar interrupted. "*Champ*'s getting a hail. I'll rereoute it through our comms."

If *Starlight Champion* was being called it probably meant either Lowbacca or Mekk. Bantha found out a few seconds later when a gruff voice said, "We're gonna deserve a bonus when this is done."

Marin sighed. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"You could say that. We decided to take the *Bottom Line* out for a spin in the outer parts of the system, like we told you. Jind suggested we poke around the asteroid belt between planets five and six. Sometimes I regret raising such a smart boy."

"What *is* it?" Bantha pressed.

"There's Imp ships in the belt. Hiding out with the asteroids. Corvettes, frigates, even some star destroyers. They're really spread out in the belt, so it's hard to spot 'em unless you get really close, but they're in there. Looks like a powerful battle group."

"*Fierfek*," Tamar snapped. "Did they see you?"

"No. We kept our distance, used asteroids as shields when we could, just like them."

"You're *sure*?"

"I told you it's a *shabla* battle group. If they saw us we'd be dead. We micro-jumped back to Randon and we're by the moon now. What's your sitrep?"

"Arlen's inside the government center now. It looks like he stirred up something but it's hard to tell what."

"The Imps wouldn't move a full battle group to this system without the government agreeing," Bantha said. "This is worse than we thought."

"The Alliance needs to know," Konar put in. "*Bottom Line*, can you send your sensor data to Master Lowbacca?"

"Happy too. We've got the Wook on speed-dial. Do you need anything else right now?"

"No, just let the Alliance know."

"On it now. I'll ask for a bonus while I'm at it."

There was a click, and the connection with the *Bottom Line* closed. Someone's heavy sigh sent static over the link. Konar said, "We may need to be ready for fast extraction."

"Agreed," Marin said. "We'll head back to *Champ* now. Can the rest of you watch the government zone?"

"I will," said Bantha.

"Soht and I will look for ways into the northwest hangar, but it may take time," Konar said. "Stand by."

As Bantha kicked his speeder alive and pushed into the air he thought it was probably worth the effort, but time was something they were short on. With that battle group hiding in the asteroid belt, they might already be out of it entirely.

His sister and a handful of other Wookiees watched from the side of the room as Lowbacca spoke with Slossar's holo-image. He'd just relayed the data the Mandalorians had

collected from Randon's asteroid belt, and while he couldn't read Sluissi faces well, the admiral's voice was grim.

"It appears our intelligence was correct, but tardy. For an Alliance world, a sector capital, to throw in with the enemy before we're even aware..." He shook his head. "Shameful. Absolutely shameful."

Lowbacca told him that something had to be done.

"Indeed." Slossar's long body straightened. "There is only one thing *to* do. We must attack."

That risked leaving Kashyyyk under-defended. Lowbacca reminded Slossar of that, but the admiral was adamant.

"The Imperials will use Randon as a beachhead to invade the entire sector. They'll be able to strike Kashyyyk and a half-dozen other Wookiee planets directly. We must deny them their starting point, and we must do it soon so we catch them off-guard."

Lowbacca asked if the admiral needed any Jedi for this mission.

"No. Keep your Jedi on Kashyyyk for now. Defending that world is more important. Randon has thrown their lot in with the enemy. We don't have the resources to invade their planet and hold it. What we can do is smash the enemy formation and force them out of the system for a few days. They're in the asteroid belt now, but those aren't easy to defend. Too much stray space rock. Too hard to plot a safe escape."

Lowbacca reminded him that it was also hard to attack targets in a belt like that.

"I'm aware. As I said, we must strike fast. Leave the rest to me, Master Jedi. Let the Wookiee authorities know the situation and tell them to prepare to defend their world."

With a curt nod, Slossar killed the connection. The holo shut off, leaving the room in darkness. Lowbacca felt Sirrakuk hovering directly behind him, expectant. She was no Jedi warrior, and she was too young to have battled Imperial slavers like their elders. Still, she had seen Kashyyyk under attack before. Once by the Shadow Academy, when they'd been mere youths, and again by Jacen Solo. Those horrors were a long time gone, half-faded

into memory. One could almost imagine they'd been nightmares.

Lowbacca gave a low growl, reminding her and all the others that Kashyyyk had never been a garden; otherwise it would not have bred a race as fierce as Wookiees. It was a dangerous world, and it was time to remind the Imperials of that fact.

Sirrakuk nodded and went to work.

Arlen could feel tense, anxious minds approaching the atrium, but when the doors opened he was still taken by surprise when a half-dozen pearly-white stormtroopers stepped through and aimed their rifles at him. He must have been getting soft in old age.

Deputy Chief Administrator Calbee remained safely behind the line of stormies. He sounded mildly embarrassed as he said, "You'll have to come with us, Master Fel. Please put your lightsaber and any, ah, other weapons you may have on the ground."

Arlen held his hands out from his sides and didn't move them. He reached out with the Force to sense these stormtroopers more clearly. There didn't seem to be any Sith hidden under those helmets but that was only mild relief. He reached out further, for Tamar and Nat and the other Jedi, and tried to convey his distress.

"Give us your weapons *now*, Master Jedi," Calbee said. "There's no reason harm should have to come to you."

Arlen shifted his eyes to the faceless troopers. "You'd shoot your Emperor's *uncle*? Do you think Roan Fel would thank you for that? I'm family to him. I used to change his *diapers*."

The absurd image jarred the troopers but not their weapons. Were he younger he might have risked it. He might have thrown some distraction into their minds, whipped out his lightsaber, tossed up a Force-block to knock them off-balance, then tried to take on all six at once. When it was over he'd have basked in pride and pulsing adrenaline.

But that had been a long time ago. When he was confident none of them would straight-up shoot him, Arlen reached

slowly to his belt, plucked his lightsaber by its hilt, and tossed it across the hard tile floor. It skidded and rolled up against the boot of the nearest stormtrooper, who squatted down and picked up the thing very carefully, like it was a live and deadly amphistaff.

"All your weapons," Calbee repeated.

"That is all my weapons."

Calbee hesitated. So did the stormies. Arlen felt someone, probably Nat, getting close and tried to stall more.

"You're welcome to pat me down if you like."

He held his arms out wide. After another long, precious moment of hesitation, two stormtroopers stepped up and began running hands over his flanks, back, chest, stomach. It had been a long time anyone had been this intimidated by him. It felt pretty flattering.

They were still working when he asked, "Who am I going to be meeting? You don't have Sha Dun himself here, do you?"

They said nothing, but he got the impression that no, the enemy admiral was elsewhere. There was probably just a garrison commander and a negotiator here at most and no Sith, which was one upside to the situation.

The other was that Nat was very, very close. Which meant he had to give the man some space.

"All right, I'll go," Arlen sighed. He stepped for the door and Calbee seemed all too grateful to back through it and let the six stormtroopers formed a circle around Arlen. The stormie captain was awkwardly holding his rifle in a one-handed grip while his other held Arlen's lightsaber, tip pointed outward at the nearest soldier's flank.

Calbee and two stormtroopers were inside the hall and Arlen was right at the door when the ceiling shattered. Glass fell like sun-bright rain and Arlen threw up a wall in the Force to protect himself. A speeder bike dropped over the atrium floor. Nat was astride it with his gold lightsaber blazing in his hand.

When the stormies tried to fire on him, Arlen Force-tapped the door controls, sealing Calbee and two soldiers in the corridor. At the same time he triggered his lightsaber and

sent a blue spear of light into the nearby stormie's hip. The man shouted and collapsed; his captain fumbled to shut off the weapon. The two other stormtroopers still in the room hefted their rifles and opened fire on Nat, who batted their attacks back at them. Arlen gave his lightsaber one more strong tug and pulled it from the captain's hand. It slapped into his own and he made one short, fast swipe that cut through the thigh of the stormtrooper in front of him.

The captain swore audibly and brought his rifle up on Arlen. Before he could shoot, Nat kicked his bike ahead a few meters and slammed its nose into the stormtrooper. He was thrown against the wall and went limp, and suddenly Nat and Arlen were the only ones in the room left upright.

Not for long; there was noise on the other side of the door as Calbee, his two stormies, and likely their backup tried to force through. With Nat's help, Arlen awkwardly climbed onto the bike's back saddle and wrapped both arms around the younger man's waist.

"You know, I *really* wanted to give this kind of thing up," Nat said.

"I know. I appreciate it anyway."

Nat grunted, kicked in their repulsors, and shot them skyward. They burst through the broken ceiling and found themselves directly above the heart of the government complex. The city was not as peaceful as it had been when Arlen landed. Green laserfire streaked through the sky. He spotted one more speeder bike, also with two riders, dodging and weaving through the blasts. As Soht and Konar drew attention from the escapees, Nat accelerated and sent them soaring over the complex's wall.

That would have been a relief, but when Arlen looked to his right and saw compact dark shapes hanging in the sky. He recognized them instantly as approaching TIE Predators.

Marin had half-expected this job to go *shebs*-up, but that didn't make her feel any better when it happened. She was behind the controls of *Starlight Champion* now, flying low and hugging the coastline as she sped southward past the capital's suburbs to its heart. As she got close to downtown's

towers she spotted brief flashes of laserfire but no explosions. She prayed they weren't too late.

"They're alive," her mother said from the co-pilot's seat. "For now."

"I wanted more confidence than that." Marin couldn't see the speeder bikes Nat or Konar were using, but she saw something else instead: three TIE predators, cutting in toward the city from over the ocean.

Marin pulled *Champ* up and set an intercept course for the TIEs. The fighters took notice: all three of them veered toward her.

"Mom, can you shoot them down?"

"Yes! I'm not an invalid." Tamar worked the controls.

Marin put up shields just in time to absorb a facefull of green laserfire. She dropped speed and pulled a sharp turn to avoid the TIEs, which shot past her and began circling black. *Starlight Champion* was no snubfighter but it handled better than most ships its size, and Marin was able to drop behind one TIE as it dove low over the ocean. Laserfire shot out from *Champ's* forward cannons but splashed the water harmlessly.

"Mom!"

"I can get them, hold on," Tamar scowled. She fired again, and these shots punched through the TIE's shields, ripped off one solar panel, and sent it tumbling into the ocean.

As Marin pulled up their aft shields rocked from laser impact. Marin looked at her scanners: two TIEs, right behind them. Also two unregistered speeders coming in low over the ocean.

She dove low and twisted *Champ* so its slanting wings ran parallel with the water. The world tilted until it was nearly upside-down but their ship's internal gravity held firm. Tamar used *Champ's* ventral turret to pick off one TIE. The other dropped back as two speeder bikes buzzed it close and Marin twisted her father's ship into a tight turn that dropped it behind the distracted TIE. Another burst of laserfire was all it took to clear the skies.

"Excellent flying," her father's voice crackled over the comlink. "*Champ* hasn't had a workout like that in years."

"Now set down somewhere and we'll get aboard," Nat added.

"Understood." Marin veered toward the coast, where there was plenty of beach to settle over. She was relieved but also a little surprised. If the Imps really were on Randon in full force, they should have mustered more than three TIEs.

Then Konar's serious voice said, "Be prepared a hard atmospheric exit."

She looked around and saw the sky still empty of TIEs. Then she checked in long-range scanner, and then she looked up. Daylight was waning, the sky growing dark, and against that violet dome she could make out flashes of explosions high above. Battle had come to Randon faster than anyone had expected.

Admiral Slossar had clearly decided good offense was the best defense, because he'd thrown a good chunk of the Fourth Fleet into the Randon System. A mere two Mon Cal cruisers appeared over the planet itself and began clearing away the few Imperial troops stationed there. Most of the fighting force went straight to the asteroid belt. The Imperials there were taken off-guard and hesitated during the battle's crucial beginning. As a result, they were quickly trapped inside their own hiding place. The Alliance closed off escape vectors for the big destroyers, slipped their own warships into the edge of the asteroid field, and began pounding all Imperials unable to find deeper cover.

It was the kind of fighting that could drag on for days, even weeks. Maybe it would; maybe the Imps would take their other ships and launch a full invasion of Wookiee space while the Alliance was distracted. If so, the locals would resist them at every step.

Arlen didn't know the future. All he knew was that he was very glad and very relieved when *Starlight Champion* slipped through the messy battle in Randon's orbit and escaped to lightspeed. Their destination was Kashyyyk, which might have been no safer, but they'd accomplished this mission without death or injury and he wanted to savor the small victory as long as he could.

It was only a few hours' ride to Kashyyyk and he spent most of them in *Champion's* cockpit. Marin really had flown the old ship as nimbly as it had even been flown. Arlen was a little envious she could still pull out the stops like that. When he had the cockpit alone to himself he allowed peaceful satisfaction to fill him. He looked over the consoles, the sensor-screens, the viewports, all more or less unchanged since he'd first gotten this ship. When he'd left Imperial space- left his brother- and started life anew with the Jedi on Ossus, *Champion* was all he'd been able to take with him. Looking back there was less continuity in his life than he'd wanted, and few accomplishments that really lasted. His ship was the exception.

He was lost in reverie when Tamar dropped into the co-pilot's seat beside him. She settled into it, looked out on flashing hyperspace, and sighed. "You know that was all unnecessary, don't you? The risking your life part?"

"We all risked our lives by coming here."

"Not like you did."

He could argue the point, but he wouldn't get very far and knew it. "It made sense at the time. We didn't know how bad things were back there."

"Well, things are bad all over."

He glanced at her; she kept watching hyperspace. "I'm glad you've been working with Marin all this time."

"It's not like anyone else will hire Skiratas nowadays." Her tone softened. "But I'm glad, too. There was a long time when I thought she'd just... dropped out of my life entirely."

"I know the feeling. She really needs to get back to Benet and Ania, though."

"Agreed. But she's way to old too be doing what her parents tell us too." She snorted softly. "If anything, *we* should start doing what she tells us."

"Youth doesn't confer wisdom any more than age."

"As you've amply demonstrated all your life."

Arlen looked at her again and caught the hint of a smile. He snorted and shook his head. Maybe she was right and he hadn't changed much, even as decades piled on. But if so, she hadn't changed either. He'd once thought age and

experience could transform a person. Now he suspected it just settled and hardened what was already there. Instead of trying to change things, change people, you accepted them for what they were, and you accepted yourself and your life, and if the sum total of all that wasn't a disaster then you learned to be content with it.

Arlen was content with it, even now as the war grew worse and worse. The life he'd lead wasn't perfect but he could accept it, barring one thing.

"Have you ever seen our granddaughter?" he asked Tamar.

She shook her head. "Nothing but Marin's holos."

"I want to rectify that if I can." When she didn't voice agreement he asked, "Don't you?"

"Of course I do. But what are you going to tell Ania? 'Hello, I'm your grandpa, the Jedi Master. By the way, your cousin's the emperor. And did you know your grandma's a karking Mando?'"

"I don't know how it would work. And I respect how Marin wants to raise her kid. It's just..." He'd been losing family his whole life, to circumstance as much as death. Davek took his sons away, then Marin left too. He sighed. "Ah, it's different for you. You've been shipping around with a boatload of clan-mates all this time."

"Jealous?"

"Yes, I'd love to spend my days watching a bunch of unwashed Mando roughnecks burp, scratch, and shoot things."

Tamar smirked. "Tell that to Mekk and he'll think it's a compliment."

"He can take it however he wants."

The cockpit dropped into silence, but it was a comfortable, companionable silence. He'd hadn't had a lot of those with Tamar, even in their good years. Maybe that was another unexpected gift of age. He could accept that and be content with it, but deep down there was one desire he needly badly to fill. One day soon, he told himself. One day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Even though the war had turned against the Alliance and the Empire was encroaching on the Core from all sides, Coruscant was still a gleaming jewel, an endless urban expanse packed with one trillion sentients who did their best to continue their lives as they always had and pretend danger didn't lurk close by. They kept their attention on daily duties and pushed the war aside. The restaurants and shops were full of people and speeder lanes packed with traffic every rush-hour. Even the local government, which should have known better, didn't greatly heighten security checks on the thousands of ships that passed daily in and out of its airspace. It was not arrogance that made them like this, but comfort, and a stubborn refusal to admit how precarious their lifestyles actually were.

Darth Nihl looked forward to teaching these Coruscanti a lesson. A long time ago, when he'd been Relik K'sharn, he'd fantasized about how he would lead his Nagai raiders against Coruscant. He'd never expected it to happen, but it had been enjoyable mental exercise. The image of Galactic City's gleaming towers aflame had been especially pleasant. As Darth Krayt's Hand he'd learned ways of attack more subtle and more effective. As soon as Nyna Calixte's spies had confirmed the Alliance had bought into the Caamas trap, Nihl began his work on Coruscant.

The attack was silent and subtle at first, as befitting the Sith. A dozen agents, each travelling separately, slipped into Galactic City and began making arrangements. By the time

Nihl himself arrived with a host of thirty Sith Lords all ready and eager for combat, twelve key sites in Galactic City had been wired and set with explosives. They'd chosen tourist attractions, shopping areas, and other places with lax security and plenty of civilians. All of them were located at least two kilometers from the Sith's true target, the Jedi Temple.

Nihl and his Sith warriors descended on Galactic City aboard an outwardly unremarkable Corellian freighter that easily slipped through Coruscant's weak security. After they checked in with all their agents on the ground, Nihl ordered the ship to hover high above the cityscape so he could look down on its endless elegant spires and pulsing lines of speeder traffic. He'd never seen Coruscant with his own eyes before, and when he reached out with the Force he could sense thronging life like he'd never felt before, all ignorant of what he was about to do.

It was a good feeling. Nihl picked out the pyramid and spires of the Jedi Temple, distant but dead ahead, then closed his eyes. His twelve agents were in place. He could feel their minds in the Force, awaiting his order. To their minds he said *now*, and in perfect unison twelve great explosions burst in different parts of the city.

Nihl opened his eyes. From the ship's cockpit he could see five of the fireballs as they turned into black plumes billowing toward the sky. In the Force he could feel panic steadily ripple through the people below.

Darth Savj had been monitoring the comm channels for Galactic City's emergency response teams, and he reported, "They're activating all units."

Nihl set eyes on the distant pyramid. "Any response from the Jedi?"

"None yet."

"Wait five more minutes. Then signal the *War Hammer*."

Savj nodded. Nihl could feel tension mount in him and the other Sith packed in this freighter. They yearned to charge ahead now and bring the fight to the heart of the Jedi. Relik K'sharn would have been just as eager, but for Darth Nihl, knowledge tempered bloodlust. The attack was most likely to succeed if all the Jedi's potential help was drawn elsewhere.

In five more minutes, Galactic City's security and medical teams would be spread out at a dozen different bombing sites. At the same time the Alliance warships in orbit would get their own distraction, leaving the Jedi totally alone.

As five minutes turned to one, Savj told him, "Still no response from the Jedi."

Curious, Nihl thought. He'd expected them to rush out to the disaster zones, eager to make public shows of altruism. No matter, though. More Jedi holed up in their temple meant more Jedi to kill.

One minute became zero, and he said, "Tell the *War Hammer* to begin its attack."

Most of the Imperial fleet was occupied springing the trap at Caamas or encircling Kashyyyk. Grand Admiral Veed had agreed to delegate one battle group, under command of Rulf Yage, for the feint on Coruscant. Less than a minute after the signal was sent, Savj reported that four star destroyers and their support ships had dropped out of hyperspace on the rimward side of Coruscant's outer orbit.

"The Alliance ships are responding," Savj added. "Two, no, three Mon Calamari cruisers are moving to intercept."

"Excellent," Nihl hissed. The plan was that Yage would hold position, draw as many ships away from Coruscant as he could, then fall back from the planet and drag them on a pointless chase.

The Jedi had no help left. When Nihl set his eyes on the temple pyramid his impatience finally matched that of his crew. "Set a collision course for the Jedi consulate. Everyone, brace for impact."

When twelve explosions went off in different parts of Galactic City, Kol Skywalker knew the time had come. A few Jedi had offered to go to the damaged zones and help. Kol had refused them and ordered the entire consulate to prepare for imminent attack. When four star destroyers appeared on the edge of Coruscant's orbit he knew the real strike was just seconds away.

Still, though all the Jedi inside stood at battle-ready, they were unprepared for the ferocity of it. One Corellian

freighter fell of the sky like a preybird, and instead of pulling up last-minute it decelerated without stopping. It punched through the temple's thick outer wall and continued onward, bursting through several interior walls before its inertia was finally stopped, leaving fiery, smoke-spewing wreckage.

Out of that wreckage, apparently unphased by it all, came dozens of Sith. A forest of blood-red lightsabers glowed through the smoke, seemingly disembodied. Then the forest became a rush figures emerging from the choking haze, all dressed in black, most of them with faces tattooed in savage black and red.

Kol Skywalker led the charge to meet them. It was pure battle, kill-or-be-killed, and after so many months of struggling against scolding admirals and demanding politicians he was almost grateful for the primal simplicity of it. He felt all the bodies around him, a violent dance of light and dark, and surrendered himself to its flow. Reacting on pure instinct he ducked beneath one swinging scarlet blade, shoved it aside with his own, then jumped high above a strike to his legs from behind. He somersaulted through the thinning smoke, landed on bent knees, pitched into a shoulder-roll, then came up on a black figure with his back turned. One upward slash dropped the Sith in pieces.

Killing was ugly business, even killing Sith, yet it had to be done. Kol flowed to his next opponent, parried, counter-attacked, knew the Sith's weakness by instinct, and slipped in a precise thrust that took him through the stomach. Then he went off again, searching for another enemy amidst the smoke. For the first time since his mother's death he had no doubt about the rightness of his action. He merely did what he had to do, again and again.

As the fight continued the dance became erratic. Even as he slew Sith he felt Jedi die, felt beings he'd known and cared about for decades blaze out in sudden flares of agony. Each death brought new panic. Kol tried to soothe the other Jedi, to convince them to fight on together and have faith, but he'd never mastered the battle-meld like Lowbacca. He felt another familiar mind, very strong, sending out to the others and telling them to rally together. At the same time he

felt that mind struggling against its own panic, and he knew that Master Qemar was under attack.

Kol ducked beneath another Sith's blade and, not bothering to fight him, raced toward where he knew Ayen Qemar would be. He let the Force pull him away from the crashed ship and its sea of black smoke to an adjacent chamber. Its ceiling rose three storeys high and a stairwell slanted from top to bottom along the opposite wall. He immediately spotted five figures battling on the stairwell's middle landing, beneath a sunlit window. Master Qemar was immediately recognizable for the blue-green head-tentacles that swirled as she defended against two Sith. Another Jedi, a green-face Nikto Kol didn't recognize, was fighting a third Sith and losing. Kol sprinted to help, but as soon as he reached the bottom of the stairs the Nikto was slashed across the chest by a lightsaber. Kol propelled himself upward, using the Force to take him to the landing with only two bounds. The Nikto's body had just dropped and Kol caught its killer unprepared. One high horizontal swipe of his saber took off the Sith's head.

He felt no triumph. He felt Qemar's pain in the Force, turned, and saw her stagger against the wall with a burning stump for her left arm. She hefted her saber weakly with her right and Kol surged to help, but one Sith stepped in to block him. Kol parried the red-faced human's attacks and could only watch over his shoulder and the second Sith pinned Qemar to the wall with the Force, batted her lightsaber out of her hand, and speared her through the chest.

Without thinking, Kol called on his anger. He felt so much of it then, it was impossible to resist. A red tide swept through him and out of him, hurling the Sith before him off his feet, over the stairwell railing, and down to the floor below.

He found himself staring into the eyes of Master Qemar's killer. They were red-gold eyes, predatory and Sith, and they were set on a chalk-white face framed by long black hair. The body beneath was tall, thin and muscular. All of it was familiar.

A grin spread on the Nagai's face, showing small sharp teeth. "Master Skywalker, I am Darth Nihl, Hand of Lord Krayt. I've waited so long to see you again."

Imperial star destroyers plunged like knives toward clustered Alliance warships, tearing violent holes in their defensive formations with repeated volleys of concussion missiles. Bombers swooped down, unleashing volleys of their own, while starfighters chased each other among giants. A handful of smaller Alliance ships attempted to break formation and escape, and the few that slipped past the first wave of star destroyers were quickly torn to pieces by the second. All the while the dwindling Alliance fleet, now split into three discrete groups all separately besieged, struggled to hold back the Imperials who'd ensnared them in this carefully constructed trap. Dead Caamas turned slowly beneath it all, uncaring.

There was no satisfaction when a bad feeling proved right. It was all Captain Yorub could do to coordinate *Indomitable's* defense. For the turbolaser crews it was simple enough: pick the nearest star destroyer and fire. It was trickier orchestrating movement for their starfighter wing, which had to defend against bombing attacks and strafing runs by enemy TIEs while at the same time assisting the big guns with attacks on the nearby destroyers. Powerful as it was, *Indomitable* couldn't handle three *Pellaeon*-class destroyers at once, and to kill even one they'd need to soften its shields with bomber support. Yorub remembered hearing from some academy instructor long ago that fighter support could turn the tide of a battle, but if you needed your snubs to survive you'd already lost the fight.

There was no illusion about winning. The Imps had played this one perfectly, luring three Alliance fleets into the Cirius system, pulling them close to Caamas with a handful of ships in low orbit, then springing its trap. Imperial ships had jumped in from every major entry vector. The biggest fleet, as Stazi had feared, jumped in from the direction of the Carida system. Apparently they'd found a way to hide from Petan's recon flight. They entered from other directions too,

fired up a set of interdictor cruisers to exponentially increase Caamas' gravity well area, and fell on the Alliance ships without mercy. Admiral Petan had brought the most ships and the Imps had concentrated on him accordingly, but the fleets commanded by Stazi and Nict were being pounded nearly as hard. At the start of it the Empire's Grand Admiral Veed had sent an all-ship broadcast encouraging the Alliance to surrender. That hadn't happened yet, but even Yorub was starting to think it might be a good plan.

"Captain," the comm lieutenant called, "We've got a reply from Coruscant."

Stazi, hunched over the tactical station, heard it and joined Yorub at the comm console. The lieutenant summarized, "They say they can't send us any backup right now. Four star destroyers appeared in the system, and there seems to have been some explosions in Galactic City."

"A distraction," Stazi said with a sneer. "Very well-played."

"We're also getting reports of an attack on the Jedi Temple."

"Then Master Skywalker was right to keep his knights out of all this," the admiral sighed. "Maybe the Force was with him."

"Did they repel the feint, or is it still going on?" asked Yorub.

"Fighting's still going on all over."

"Thank you, lieutenant." Stazi drew Yorub a few steps away and lowered his voice. "A few extra ships wouldn't help us here. We've just gotten word from some of our scouts. The Imperials have blocked all major hyperlanes from the Cirius system with those Hapan pulse-mass generators, with plenty of standard proton mines mixed in."

It was a death sentence, pure and simple. Yorub should have felt something as his last hope died, but he didn't. "What now, sir?"

"I've looked into a backdoor, and I think there *might* be exit vectors the Imps have unaccounted for." Stazi glanced over his shoulder at the busy tactical holo. "With those

interdictors in operation, we still don't have a chance to getting to them."

"We don't have a chance of knocking out the drag ships either."

"We might if we had help."

"All three fleets are barely holding together," Yorub reminded. On cue the command deck trembled as missile volleys impacted on the forward shields.

"I'll patch a call to *Pride of Corellia*," Stazi said. "Admiral Nict might be able to spare a few ships to help."

Yorub looked at the tactical display again. Nict's fleet was in even worse shape than theirs. The only way to survive now would be to surrender. That would effectively end this war in the Empire's favor, but if they fought they were dead anyway.

Yorub swallowed and looked at Stazi. His lipless mouth was set tight, and there was determination in his red eyes. The admiral would rather die than give in. Yorub wilted in shame, then straightened in resolve.

"Tell me what you need," he said. "I'll make sure it's done."

This was a different Nihl than the one Kol had battled two years ago. He'd been deadly then, but he'd learned to control his rage, refine it, release it in careful blows and hold it in as he defended against Kol. He moved faster, blocking and parrying less, dodging more often.

If Nihl had grown more sure of his power, Kol was off-balance. When fighting Sith before he'd been able to submerge his will into the Force and let himself flow with its currents. When battling Nihl he felt as though he was trying to hold his own against a storm that lashed and withdrew in unpredictable bursts. Maybe the loss of Master Qemar had unbalanced him; maybe Darth Nihl truly had grown stronger in the past two years while Kol had grown weaker.

It was terrifying to think about, so he tried not to think at all. He threw himself into the fight, blocking and attacking, slicing and stabbing but never landing a hit on the agile Nagai as they danced up and down the stairwell. He was so

consumed with battling Nihl that he barely noticed the second Sith, the one he'd knocked to the floor, come up the stairs behind him. Kol felt his ill intent in the Force and propelled himself into a high somersault. He tucked in his legs, just barely avoiding Nihl's slash, then arced over the second Sith and came down behind him. The Sith spun and caught Kol's counterattack, but at the least he'd succeeded in getting distance from Nihl. Kol allowed himself to be backed down the stairwell, all the while making wide attacks on the Sith's left and right flanks, forcing him to stay in the center of the stairs so Nihl couldn't slip past him and join the fight.

The Nagai, frustrated, bounded over the railing, down to the floor, and tried to circle around Kol from behind. That gave Kol the extra seconds he needed to push his attack on the other Sith. He felt confidence come back and with it some of his inner calm. He swiped at the Sith's legs, forcing him to jump high. The second time he did it Kol added a Force-push that knocked the Sith off-balance so he landed with feet on different stairs. The Sith buckled, then tried to shift his feet for steadier purchase. Kol used that moment to duck low, then thrust up. The Sith's lightsaber flicked down on the side of his beam, crackling against it but not stopping it as it thrust into the man's stomach.

By then Nihl was on him from behind. Kol jumped again, high and forward, so he landed several stairs up from the dying Sith. He and Nihl watched as the scarlet-faced man clutched his gut, dropped to his knees, and retched in pain.

Nihl cut his head from his shoulders with one easy swipe, then strode over the corpse. His eyes were on Kol's, still red-gold and savage, but Kol no longer feared what he saw. With a flick of his lightsaber, Kol beckoned the Sith to attack.

Something had changed in the fight, even before Skywalker caught Darth Savj with a killing thrust. The Jedi had been off-balance at the start of the fight, perhaps from grief at seeing his comrades killed. Nihl had no so such trauma from losing Savj; they'd shared the One Sith goal of domination but nothing more. Skywalker had recovered his confidence and his skill, and now he'd taken the high ground,

forcing Nihl to defend against blows from above while risking down-low strikes at the Jedi's legs. The situation provided Nihl with enough anger to summon bursts of Force-lightning but Skywalker was ready for those too, catching them on the blade of his lightsaber.

Nihl snarled and backed down several steps in an attempt to lure Skywalker close. The Jedi didn't take it; he stood firm above the Sith, lightsaber held low and defensive, daring Nihl to attack.

Nihl gathered another fistful of dark lightning and hurled it at Skywalker. At the same time he crouched, unsprung, and threw himself into the air. He arced himself over Skywalker and swung his saber down as he did so, hoping to take off a piece of the Jedi's head. Instead Skywalker, lighting still crackling around his saber, ducked low to avoid the attack and spun on one foot. He popped up, reared back, and struck out with the other boot, catching Nihl with the stomach as he came down. The Sith's lower back slammed into the bannister and with his arms held high above him he overbalanced, tipped, and fell off the stairs.

He landed on his back but at least called on the force to cushion his impact. As he snapped to his feet Nihl scolded himself. Anger was his tool, not his master, and much as he'd love to kill Skywalker that was not his goal here today. As Skywalker came to meet him, sidestepped down the stairs rather than jumping, he reached out to touch the other Sith in the Force. They'd slain Jedi and been slain in nearly equal amount, which meant there was more Jedi still fighting than Sith.

Much as he'd like to finish the rest of these Jedi, that wasn't today's goal. Darth Krayt had promised there'd be time for that later. Today was about forcing the Alliance to its knees, and the Imperial navy was doing that right now over Caamas.

So when Kol Skywalker came to the bottom of the stairs and slowly approaching Nihl, saber poised for another fight, the Sith mirrored his gesture but reached further in the Force to touch the agents who were waiting outside the Jedi Temple. They touched him back, affirming that they were one their way.

Then Nihl turned to Skywalker and fought. The battle was almost done, though Skywalker hardly knew it. Nihl renewed his attacks, fast and confident, fueled by anger but controlled by iron will. Skywalker defended and attacked in equal measure but the two opponents seemed equally matched, unable to score a hit as they danced across the chamber's debris-strewn floor.

Suddenly a shadow eclipsed the daylight window above them. Laserfire came next, a fierce hail that shattered the glass and send it raining inward. Skywalker jumped back, putting himself beneath cover of the stairs, but Nihl simply willed the shards away with the Force. He sent a clarion to his fellow Sith and felt them disentangling from the Jedi to join him. A moment later the entire outside wall exploded and the concussive burst of a single missile explosion popped Nihl's ears. Once again he used the Force to shield himself from debris, and through the blown-open gap in the Jedi Temple's wall he saw a second ship with bay doors open, ready to pull in the survivors of the Sith assault team so they could fight another day.

Nihl felt Sith joining him in this hall and felt the Jedi coming in pursuit. He felt his comrades' frustration that they couldn't finish the slaughter and told them the fight with the Jedi wasn't over yet.

As Sith propelled themselves through the hole in the wall and into the evacuation ship, Nihl spared a glare at Kol Skywalker, huddled in the shadow of the broken stairwell. His lightsaber was in his hand but shut down, and his blue eyes met Nihl's across the frenzied distance. At that moment Nihl realize how badly he ached to kill the Jedi, how much he *needed* it. Though he'd passed all his trials and become a true Sith Lord, his ambition remained. If he could slay a Skywalker he would be indisputably greater than any Sith save Lord Krayt himself.

But he felt the Jedi surging behind him and knew it would not be today. Nihl joined the last Sith racing up the stairs. He followed them, hurled himself over the rubble, through the air, and into the freighter's hold. Wind rushed past him,

furling his hair like a black banner as the ship pulled away from the half-ruined temple and made for the sky.

They'd finish this yet, Nihl told himself. One day soon.

Nyna Calixte had decided to watch the battle at Caamas in her private office. Its holo-projector cast light to the center of the room, displaying the Imperial forces as they split, encircled, and pressed upon the Alliance battle groups. The trap had worked better than she'd ever hoped. The Alliance seemed to have brought large portions of three separate fleets, all of which were now trapped in the Cirius system. Veed had split his fleet to attack all three Alliance groups at once, leaving Admiral Fenel's ships to catch enemy ships bold or foolish enough to try to slip through the tightening Imperial vise. The two smaller Alliance groups had tightened formation and were defending themselves as well could be hoped against greater numbers, but the largest Alliance group, which leaked transmission indicated was helmed by the supreme commander Piers Petan, had been broken apart. Veed ordered his destroyers to charge into their scattering formation, which created a messy brawl between twenty-plus heavy capital ships.

Calixte could make no sense of it and switched the holo-display to show footage from Veed's flagship. The ship sitting dead ahead of it was one of the large Mon Cal *Scythe*-class cruisers, maybe Petan's own. It would be just like Veed to attack Petan personally and try to claim credit for vanquishing him. The grand admiral was really gunning for Roan Fel's throne, and he thought glorious victory at Caamas would let him achieve that. He didn't know the Sith as well as Calixte did.

As she watched, her personal comlink buzzed and she brought it to her lips. "This is Calixte."

"Madam Director," her assistant said, "You requested to be informed when *War Hammer* withdrew from Coruscant."

"I remember my own orders. Is it done?"

"Yes, Madam Director. All four destroyers have completed their feint and left the Coruscant system."

"What about the Sith?"

“*War Hammer* reports it has retrieved the Sith strike team. They report success at the Jedi Temple.”

That could mean anything. She’d been hoping Kol and his companions would rid her of Darth Nihl’s murderous band, but doubted she’d be so lucky. She clicked off the comlink, went over to her desk, and brought up feeds from the news-nets. The battle at Caamas shrunk to one corner and she reviewed scattered bits of news coming from the Alliance capital. From the jumbled reports, it seemed like the Sith plan had gone off as intended. A dozen explosions in Galactic City had scattered the local emergency teams, leaving the Jedi consulate open for attack. Her chest tightened as she saw aerial footage of the pyramid with two smoking ship-sized holes blown through its walls. The reports also confirmed that a number of Jedi has survived. There was no word on Kol, not yet. She tried to assure herself that he would be the last to fall.

There was nothing she could do but wait for more reports to come in. She switched the holo-display back to the battle and admired the chain of explosions bursting across the hull of Petan’s flagship. The Alliance would put up a brave fight for a time, but they weren’t suicidal fanatics. They’d surrender, and from the look of things that was coming soon.

“Are you pleased with your war?”

The voice turned Calixte’s attention away from the holo-image to the man walking into her chamber. He came alone, trailing violet robes behind him. His face was hard, his eyes angry.

He knew, she thought. After all this time, somehow, he knew. He could kill her now if he wanted to, but things had changed since she’d first started working with the Sith. The Empire was on the verge of its greatest victory since it ended the Clone Wars and Fel couldn’t just throw away what he’d gained.

So she hoped, anyway. Showing nothing, Calixte crossed her arms over her chest. “Emperor Fel. With all due respect, Your Majesty, this is the *Empire’s* war- not mine.”

“Oh, don’t be so modest, Nyna. It was well played.” Fel stalked closer. The anger in his voice was barely restrained,

but it was a cool, spiteful anger. “Consider. A century ago, the Yuuzhan Vong invaded the galaxy, destroyed the ecosystems of many worlds before we- and the Galactic Alliance- defeated them and forced them into exile.

“The Jedi, however, believed the aliens could be habituated to our galaxy and used Vong terraformers- shapers- to help reclaim some devastated worlds. A noble experiment.” Fel began pacing a slow, steady circle around Calixte. She stared at the holo-feed, refusing to meet his eyes. “But their efforts were sabotaged. Veed and many of the High Moffs screamed it was an act of war. The Empire issued an ultimatum which the Alliance, with Jedi urging, rejected. So we are at war.”

She said nothing. His circle tightened. The holographic battle raged on, forgotten.

“The Yuuzhan Vong were framed, just as the Jedi claimed,” Fel snarled. “The Sith, who just *happened* to show up a year into the war as our allies, were the ones who did it. And you and Grand Admiral Veed helped plan it. Veed was too prepared to manipulate the Moff Council and force my hand to *not* have known about it beforehand.

“Which means, of course, that *you* were at the center of it. The Sith contacted you *first*, didn’t they?”

There was no point in denying. Calixte tilted her head back, let her eyes finally catch his, and allowed a tight smile.

“Yes, of course they did,” Fel seethed. “But instead of bringing them to me, you brought them to your lover, Veed. And the Sith waited until the war actually began to begin emerging, offering an alliance which *you* had already manipulated the other moffs into accepting.”

He lunged close enough to spit in her ear. She didn’t flinch. “You *betrayed* me, Calixte. I am your emperor. Your first allegiance should have been to me.”

“My first loyalty is to the Empire,” she said.

Fel drew back a step and sneered. “Nonsense. Your first loyalty is, and probably always has been, to yourself.”

“And yours isn’t?” She looked away from the holo and raised a brow. “You *real* concern is that someone might replace you on the throne.... Your Majesty.”

"I am the emperor," Fel snarled. "What you have spoken is treason."

Suddenly she was staring at the sizzling white tip of a lightsaber. She didn't flinch that time either, but it was harder. She'd seen him angry before but the spite in his eyes verged on murder. She was frightened, but she'd known this conversation was coming since she made her pact with the Sith. She kept her voice steady and her arms crossed. "I've said what many of the Moff Council think, and I have very powerful allies."

"The Sith? They cannot be trusted. When you've completed your usefulness, they'll kill you."

"The Sith will need, and will continue to need, the Empire for its military muscle. They'll need the Galactic Alliance bureaucracy to *run* the galaxy. They'll always need me." She allowed a tiny, taunting smile. "The only question is, will they need *you*?"

He didn't seem bothered by that question. "You have given me enough reason to execute you on the spot. Give me a reason why I shouldn't."

She moved her hands to her hips. "Striking down an unarmed person in anger? Isn't that what the *Sith* do? And you abhor the Sith... Your Majesty."

He froze, blade-tip near her throat, but didn't strike. He couldn't bring himself to. That one reminder had stayed his wrath, as she'd known it would. It didn't cancel his anger, or his hatred for her, but it bought her another few days of life.

And that, she strongly suspected, was all she'd need from Roan Fel.

The holo-image of the battle blurred to static and was replaced by a shot of Veed. The admiral said, "Attention all ships. This is Grand Admiral Morlish Veed of the Imperial navy. To prevent further loss of life on all sides, I have accepted the surrender of the fleet commander of the Galactic Alliance. All ships stand down and await further instructions."

Fel's lightsaber shrunk back to its hilt. He let the weapon dangle at his side. The spite in his face relaxed; he looked suddenly tired, and very lost.

"For all practical purposes, the war is over, sire. Coruscant can no longer be militarily defended. The Galactic Alliance *must* now surrender."

"The Jedi will not. Certainly not to an Empire in league with the Sith."

"They will have no choice."

"You do not understand the Jedi, Calixte. You don't know how hard they will fight. Once, the Empire destroyed the Jedi Order. I will not permit it to do so again. The Jedi will be allowed to withdraw from the temple on Coruscant to the academy on Ossus. It is my explicit order that they be allowed to do so."

It was exactly what Calixte had been hoping to hear, but she didn't let relief show. "You had best give the command personally and right away," she told Fel. "Before the Sith give a *different* order."

Fel looked like he wanted to raise that lightsaber to her again. But effort he hooked it on his belt and angled for the door.

"You should be happy about one thing," Calixte told him. "The Empire is now more powerful than it's been in over a hundred years. You'll get to march on Coruscant as its conquerer and king."

"There will be no pleasure in it."

"No, but you'll have to fake it. Gather all your Knights. Gather your daughter and your wife for your grand entrance. You might show the Sith you're a force to be reckoned with yet."

Fel's eyes flared anger again, and something else. His upper lip twitched. With effort he said, "Empress Elliah is dead."

She'd heard nothing about that, and Calixte heard everything. She'd gotten vague reports of a disturbance at the Imperial Knight academy the day before, and of some possible incident at INN headquarters, but they'd seemed unconnected.

All she could muster were vague platitudes. "I'm very sorry to hear that. I had nothing but respect for your wife."

"As opposed to *me*."

“Your Majesty-”

“Not one more word!” The lightsaber was in his hand again and he was two steps closer. The sizzling white energy-blade was a small thrust away from Calixte’s neck and she knew if she said one wrong thing rage would take Fel and Fel would take her head.

So she said nothing at all and waited.

His lips curled to a snarl. “One of my best Knights, Eshkar Niin, has been corrupted by the Sith. It was *he* who revealed your treason. My wife led the team sent to arrest him and was killed.”

She recalled Niin only vaguely, as the lone Iktotchi among the Knights. “I had nothing to do with that, Majesty.”

“I very much hope so. If I learn otherwise, I *will* kill you. And I will enjoy doing so.” The lightsaber retracted again. He lowered it to his side.

Calixte’s heart stopped racing. As Fel moved for the door she didn’t risk getting in a final word. She simply watched him leave, then started planning how best to stay alive.

Explosions were still rocking *Indomitable* on all sides, and the picket ahead burst into an explosion so bright Yorub had to shield his sensitive eyes. When it died down enough for him to see the admiral, he stepped carefully toward the tactical station, bearing the closest thing he had to good news.

“Admiral Stazi?” Yorub called.

“Word from the Jedi?”

“Yes. They have managed to blunt the Sith feint on Coruscant. However, they’ve taken heavy casualties and cannot come to our aid. Not in time, anyway.”

As good news went it was as bad as could be. They’d tried to plan an attack on the enemy interdictors with Admiral Nict but after the collapse of Petan’s battle group, the Imperials had rapidly redeployed their ships and scrubbed Stazi’s attack strategy. Yet even that had only been a long shot; this slaughter had been ordained the moment Petan and the victory-hungry triumvirs had gobbled up the Empire’s bait.

A voice came unannounced and sudden over the shipwide comm system, and there could only be one source.

“Attention fleet. This is Admiral Petan speaking. I have agreed to Grand Admiral Veed’s terms of surrender, both at Caamas and elsewhere. I order all ships to stand down and await his instructions. Petan out.”

No cease-fire was immediately. Lasers flared and explosions continued to burst outside the bridge viewport. Yorub grew dizzy trying to take it in. Petan wasn’t just surrendering the battle, he was ordering the whole Alliance fleet to lay down arms.

With one static-scrubbed transmission, the Empire had won.

“That’s it, then,” Yorub muttered. “The Imperials will be over Coruscant within the day. It’s over.”

To his surprise, Stazi’s face twisted into an angry scowl. “Like hell, Yorub! Patch me in fleetwide!”

Yorub dropped back to the command chair and quickly turned on the widest transmission. He gave Stazi a single go-ahead nod, and the Duro stepped into the center of the bridge for all the crew to see.

Minutes ago Stazi had been as harried as the rest of them. After the final blow he’d not broken but gathered scattered strength into himself, and with angry dignity the admiral said, “Attention, all Galactic Alliance personnel! This is Admiral Gar Stazi of the core fleet! I decline any Imperial offer for surrender unless it is *theirs*! Any other ship or fighter at Caamas disinclined to surrender should form up on the *Indomitable*’s position *immediately*!”

As the bridge crew snapped to action, comm reported an incoming transmission, and the holo-image of a stern crew-cut Imperial appeared from the main projector. “Admiral Stazi, this is Grand Admiral Veed. The hyperspace lanes have been mined and you are outnumbered and outgunned. The result of your defiance can only be slaughter. Reconsider.”

Stazi gave Veed only a dismissive sideways glare. “I will surrender, Admiral, when I can no longer fight. Stazi, out.”

The holo shut off. Every eye on the bridge hung on Stazi. The crew were too stunned to move.

"Stop gaping and get to work!" Yorub shouted, then started snapping off orders.

All possible guns targeted the star destroyer dead ahead and opened fire. Helm put full power to sublight engines and set them on a near-collision course with the battered destroyer. The Imperials had relented their attack for only a minute but were unprepared when *Indomitable* charged ahead with all guns blazing.

The Alliance ships nearest Stazi's joined the charge, and together they tore through the destroyer's shields and ripped a fiery hole in its bow. As the destroyer started to drift, *Indomitable* tore through the curtain flame and wreckage to push ahead. A trail of Alliance ships followed, most of them avoiding the crippled destroyer entirely rather than put it out of its misery. There was plenty killing left to do before they got out of here.

The Imperials scrambled to stop Stazi, but in this rush to swamp Petan's battle group they'd left holes in their line. One of them was close to the admiral's exit vectors and on his command most of the ships cut a straight line toward it.

Yorub pulled himself away from the gunnery crews and joined Stazi at the tactical holo. "We've got the right heading, but what about those drag ships?"

"That will require sacrifice," Stazi snarled. "Lieutenant, hail *Mon Gesal*. Tell them to take their nearest gunships and attack that interdicator." He pointed at one light on the holo-display.

The young Pantoran nodded and started to relay the order. Yorub said, "*Mon Gesal* could handle that drag ship by itself, but the Imps will send destroyers to defend it."

"Yes, but hopefully not before *Mon Gesal* can knock out its gravity well generators. As I said, Jaius, we're going to have to make sacrifices."

Yorub couldn't deny the grim truth. *Indomitable* and at least half of Stazi's battle group were charging ahead for the escape zone. The Imperials were sending ships to intercept, but for the moment they weren't under direct fire. Yorub gave the holo another look-over. What was left of Petan's battle group was still scattered and pinned down, effectively

out of the fight. Some ships were breaking out of the other group, *Pride of Corellia* among them.

"Look at Nict's group," Yorub said, "Some of his fighters and capital ships are heading for us, Admiral, and a whole mess of Imps."

"Bring the *Indomitable* around. We'll provide cover for some of the more heavily damaged ships."

Yorub ordered helm to adjust course while the rest of their battle group continued their run for the escape point. The Imperials scattered on the edges of the battle zone were having a hard time picking targets to chase, which allowed the Alliance ships a little more time to regroup.

As *Indomitable* grew closer to Nict's ships, *Mon Gesal* was slugging it out with the Imperial interdicator. Yorub didn't see it himself, but he felt a slight shudder through the deck as *Indomitable*'s internal gravity shifted to compensate for the death of the interdiction field. *Mon Gesal* probably wouldn't last make it to the escape zone, but it had done its part.

"Excellent!" Stazi said. "All ships, press ahead! Helm, patch my escape coordinates to all the ships running with is!"

Yorub noted a blazing light on the comm board. "Admiral Nict of the *Pride of Corellia*, Admiral."

The Duro snapped two fingers. "Put him on!"

Nict's holo-image appeared where Veed's had. "Gar, tell me you have a plan!"

"Be ready to jump, old friend. I'm sending the coordinates now."

"Jump where, confound it? All the major hyperlanes around Caamas are lined with Imperial mines and gravity bombs!"

"There are other routes, Nict, some that only spacers know."

"You can't be serious! Those are *notoriously* unreliable! We could end up in the heart of a star!"

"Better to die in the blazing core of a sun than surrender to the Imperials and their thrice-damned Sith allies! If you don't agree, Nict, then show them your belly and bed for mercy! I will not!"

Nict shook his head. "Well, of course we're coming. You don't have to get all huffy about it!"

"Just making sure. Once we're clear, we'll have some Corellian brandy I've been saving, you and I."

"My favorite," Nict snorted. "See you on the other side, Admiral."

Pride of Corellia killed its transmission. As its battle group joined with *Indomitable* all ships adjusted course to follow the others. The first ships were already slipping out of Caamas' gravity well and slipping into hyperspace along Stazi's secret coordinates.

It would have been cause for cheer, but more Imperial ships were bearing down on them. The Imps had recovered from their initial shock and were performing a deliberate entrapment maneuver, slowing the Alliance ships down by gnawing at their flanks and forcing them to divert power from engines to shields. At the same time more destroyers were trying to cut in ahead of them, sealing them off from their escape route. Yorub thought he saw Veed's flagship among them.

"I'm not sure we can make it," Yorub told Stazi. "At least some got away."

The admiral shook his head. "We're too close to give up! Tell all ships to put more power to engines!"

It was a mad gamble, even for Stazi. "Sir, if we don't properly reinforce our shields--"

"Then we'll smash into the wall Veed's throwing up ahead. I said I'd die before I surrender and I mean it." He slapped the Pantoran lieutenant on the shoulder. "You heard the order! All ships put all power to engines! Go now!"

The young man could only comply. Yorub stared at the tactical holo and watched as more and more Alliance lights winked out. At the same time *Indomitable* was leading a fast charge that, from the look of it, would slip past the Imps and into hyperspace before Veed could fire on them. They were taking hideous losses, but the only alternatives were to take more, or surrender.

Stazi had made the choice for all of them. Yorub had doubted his admiral before, more times than he'd admit, but

not now. It came on him like a burst of enlightenment, even as direct turbolaser hits scored their hull and rocked the deck: If Gar Stazi died, so did the Galactic Alliance. To save one was to save the other, and Jaius Yorub sworn his oath to the Alliance a long time ago.

More Alliance ships fell back, crippled, or burst into flames. Yorub's heart sank when one particular light on the holo went out, and he called, "Admiral, the *Pride of Corellia* is gone!"

Stazi shook his head. "We'll mourn later. All ships, prepare to jump!"

Just seconds later, the helm lieutenant reported that they'd cleared Caamas' gravity field. Yorub shouted at her to jump. The deck shuddered; stars remained stars. Then the entire ship seems to groan around the, and the groan raised pitch to a scream-

And then they jumped, taking the last scraps of the Alliance with them.

Once the frenzy and adrenaline-rush of battle had drained away, once Kol had pulled back from his combat-fueled submersion in the Force, all he was left with was smoke and ruin.

Daylight spilled through the holes torn in the Jedi temple's outer walls. It mercilessly illuminated walls laced with black lightsaber-strokes, chunks of gnarled shrapnel, smooth floor-tiles coated in ash. Most of all, it showed too many bodies. There were Sith bodies, Jedi bodies. Some lay whole, many in pieces. Kol bent over Master Qemar's corpse and saw his own reflection in her all-black eyes. He saw a face caked in sweat and dust, and blue eyes widened by shock. It belonged to a man who was just now realizing the enormity of what had happened.

His great-grandfather had created this place as a home for the New Jedi Order he had built. It had been erected in imitation of the Jedi Temple of old, and even after Luke had withdrawn the Jedi's headquarters to Ossus it had remained as an outpost and a constant reminder of the critical role the Jedi played in galactic history. It had survived attacks by

Mandalorians, by Abeloth, by the Sith. It had stood proud for a century, before being ripped apart on Kol's watch.

The physical damage was bad enough. Worse was the realization of how perfectly it represented the fate of Luke Skywalker's Jedi Order. The scale of his failure threatened to crush him, and it took great effort for Kol to rise to his feet.

He made his way to the hall where wounded Jedi had been laid out. More than a dozen healers had been on-site at the time of the attack and they were hard at work fixing injuries small and large. The Sith seemed to have taken the worst of the exchange, though just barely.

As Kol walked among the laid-out bodies, a young man in Knight's robes who looked barely older than Cade hurried up to him. "Master Skywalker," the boy said, "There's an urgent message in the communications room."

He let the boy lead him there and braced himself for what he'd find. "Where is it from, Ossus?"

"No, Master. It's, ah, from Emperor Fel."

Kol had no warmth in his heart for his cousin, not now. "What does Fel want?"

"It's actually a pre-recorded message, Master. It sounds like it's being broadcast everywhere. I mean *everywhere* everywhere."

Kol didn't like the sound of that. When he got to the communications room a handful of other Masters were there, watching with dour faces as a holo-image of Roan Fel, blown to twice life size, spoke in regal tones.

"My Empire is generous. The Galactic Alliance officers who surrendered to us at Caamas will be treated with leniency. The soldiers will be allowed to return home to their families."

"Petan made a total surrender," the Jedi beside Kol whispered. "He ordered the entire fleet to stand down."

As Kol tried to grasp that, Fel went on. "I look forward to meeting with the Galactic Alliance triumvirate when I arrive on Coruscant. Rest assured, I will not dismantle the triumvirate *or* the senate. Those bodies will continue to exist, as will the great bureaucratic structure that has sustained order in the galaxy for a century. Under my guidance those

institutions will be improved and expanded to service the entire galaxy, so that *all* beings may know justice, security, and peace. All of you who have grown weary of war should now rejoice. Under Imperial law, there will be no room for strife.”

Some Jedi shook their heads. Some continued to stare in dread. Kol felt the young man beside him shudder.

“To the Jedi Order, I say this.” Fel added steel to his voice. “The role of the Jedi in ruining one hundred worlds will be carefully evaluated. In order to ensure objectivity in this process, and a peaceful transition of power, I hereby order all Jedi, no matter their location in the galaxy, to fall back to Ossus. You have my word that no Jedi will be harmed on or en route to Ossus. Those remaining on planets under Imperial jurisdiction will be considered criminals and treated accordingly. This includes Jedi on Coruscant. Within twenty-four standard hours of this transmission, all Jedi will evacuate the capital or face consequences. No exceptions will be made.”

Fel went on, next detailing how he proposed to bring justice to the hundred worlds, but Kol barely listened. All eyes on the chamber shifted to him. Each set of eyes was like a heavy weight, and combined he felt like they would pull him to his knees.

But in the end, there was only one response he could possibly give.

“We must leave the temple and depart for Ossus,” he said. “That includes the wounded. Begin evacuation procedures immediately.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

By now they'd all heard the surrender order from Admiral Petan, its official confirmation by the Alliance triumvirs, and the stern ultimatum from Roan Fel. There was no denying the calamity. Now they had to figure out what to do about it.

Lowbacca and a host of Wookiee elders had gathered in Thikiianna's communications center. Admiral Slossar's holo-image seemed to wilt before them as he said, "I am in no position to refuse the order. That would be treason and it would waste the lives under my command. Therefore I've contacted Admiral Sha Dun and offered my surrender."

The elder to Lowbacca's right roared a question.

After Slossar read its translation he said, "Most of our ships- his and mine- are still in the Randon system. I'll present myself to him there shortly. All ships currently at Kashyyyk have been ordered to hold position but lay down arms. When the Imperials arrive my people won't fire a gun to stop them. I'm sorry, but that is how it has to be."

Grunts and low murmurs shifted between the elders. Slossar apparently didn't need a translation for them. "I *strongly* recommend against fighting in your own. I have utmost respect for your warriors' prowess, but this is a fight you cannot win."

Another elder, fur tangled and gray, said that the Wookiees had never meekly surrendered to their oppressors before. They'd fought Palpatine's Empire and they would fight Fel's.

Slossar wilted even more. "*Please*, reconsider. The Empire has an entire fleet they can bring down on Kashyyyk. They

can raze your forests, enslave your people, do everything the Empire's done in the past, and we cannot stop them."

Karrashchakuk suggested that there was fighting, and there was fighting. The forests of Kashyyyk held dangers, especially for offworlders. That got more grunts of assent from the other Wookiees. Lowbacca told Slossar that he respected the admiral's position, but the Wookiees would continue to fight in their own way. That would require sacrifice, and the illusion of compliance with Imperial law, but they'd not surrender to an iron fist.

To his relief Slossar nodded. "I understand, Master Lowbacca. And I wish you the best." The Sluissi considered a moment. "I believe I can help you in a small way. My ships at Kashyyyk have weapons and equipment that your resistance can use. I can order my captains to offload some quietly and quickly, before the Imperials take over the system."

That got unanimous appreciation from the Wookiees. Lowbacca said they'd get to work immediately and asked if there was anything else they could do for Slossar.

The admiral considered again, longer this time. Then he lowered his voice, as if afraid of being overheard, and said, "Not all Alliance ships have surrendered. I've learned that the Fifth Fleet's admiral, Gar Stazi, managed to escape Caamas. We don't know where he is or what he's doing, but he'd sworn to keep up the fight. I'm not in the position to join him, but I know I have officers who are."

Karraschakuk asked if Slossar had sent ships looking for Stazi. The admiral shook his head. "The Imperials may have a full listing of ships under my command. They'll know if some are unaccounted for. They *won't* have a reliable listing of equipment and personnel. We can make some disappear from officials logs and send them to you, or to Stazi."

Even in defeat, he was trying to continue the fight in small ways. Lowbacca gave the admiral a respectful roar and asked what specifically could be done.

"The Imperials will probably be monitoring all traffic in and out of Kashyyyk," Slossar said. "They may even be putting in those Hapan gravity well mines. Torn Station, on

the edge of this sector, hasn't fallen to the Empire yet and it's full of civilian vessels that have been bottled up there for weeks. Some will try to get out of the sector now that fighting's over. I'm going to move people as quietly as I can to Torn Station. I need you to provide civilian haulers to smuggle them out on. I'm hoping to divert at least twenty thousand soldiers. I need ships that withstand at least some Imperial scrutiny, and mine are too obviously Alliance."

It was a risky proposition. If the Imperials found out about the smuggling operation they could take their wrath out on Kashyyyk or even Slossar himself. There was risk for everyone, and it wasn't like a Wookiee to shirk his fair share. Besides, there were Jedi on Kashyyyk who needed to get out of here. After the attack on Coruscant, no one trusted Fel's assurance that Jedi wouldn't be harmed. Lowbacca roared agreement, and the elders joined him.

Their chorus drew a faint smile from Admiral Slossar. "I'm set to meet with Sha Dun in two hours. I'll get things moving before then. I'll try to slow down the Imperial's deployment, but I'm hoping we can get my people out with twenty standard hours."

That would require fast action, but crises usually did. Lowbacca gave the admiral a promise and thanked him for keeping up the fight.

"It will be a harder fight for you, I suspect," Slossar said gravely. "Good luck, gentlebeings."

The holo shut off and the Wookiees went to work.

When Lowbacca brought his news to the Jedi, Marin joined them to listen. Nat was there too, plus her mother, Jind, and Mekk, but most of the talk was Jedi business, and for good reason.

"I do not trust Fel's promises not to harm Ossus. We've seen what they're worth." Grolik shook his shaggy head.

"Master Skywalker is on his way there now, along with the rest of the Jedi from Coruscant," said Konar. "But he's given no specific order for the rest of us to follow."

"All the apprentices are on Ossus, including Master Skywalker's son," the Mon Cal student Omwrak pointed out.

"Someone has to be ready to defend them... or evacuate them."

Lowbacca, Marin noticed, volunteered nothing about the hidden temple created on Taivas. She glanced sideways at Nat and saw his face a stiff mask; he wasn't going to volunteer it either. They'd known when they'd created the place that it had to be a last resort. The whole thing would be ruined if they told the Jedi on Kashyyyk and even one of them was captured by the Sith- and that was very possibility, now that the Wookiees had announced their official surrender.

Taivas and the hidden temple would stay secret for now. There was still the slim chance they wouldn't have to use it.

The important part, Lowbacca told them, was to escape Wookiee space. The Imperials would be here in mere hours. He explained Slossar's request that they help smuggle troops and supplies to Admiral Stazi's forces, and outlined the plan to rendezvous with the Alliance bitter-enders at Torn Station, an old complex drifting around a white dwarf star on the edge of the Mytaranor Sector. It was a hub for cargo traffic both legal and otherwise, and plenty of ships had gotten stuck there when the war came to surrounding systems. It was the best place to try and slip something past the Imps. All they needed was a ship.

When they got to that part Marin felt her chest tighten. She only half-listened as the Jedi started debating how they could acquire a large civilian-registered cargo hauler on short notice and were short on good ideas. Mekr and Jind said they'd be willing to carry whatever they could fit aboard the *Bottom Line* for the usual fee, but that was all they could do. Arlen added that *Starlight Champion* would of course transport as many as it could. But really, it all came down to her.

With a ragged sigh, Marin said, "I can help too. I've got *Runaround*, which is small, and can't carry much... but I think I can do more than that."

Lowbacca, Nat, and her parents all looked at her with wordless understanding. Ignorant of it all, Master Zho Tuum asked, "Can you supply us with a bigger ship?"

"Yeah. I think I can get us one." Her mouth turned dry. "They're at Alanteen now... Should be able to get to Torn Station within a standard day."

"That's all the time we'll have," said Konar. "If we're lucky."

"Then I'd better get on it." She stood on shaking legs. "If you'll excuse me."

Lowbacca pushed off his bench and roared that they *all* needed to get moving. The other Jedi followed, but Lowbacca put a paw on his son Karrash's shoulder. The two exchanged muted growls and murmurs in Shyriiwook, and while Marin's wasn't the best she got the idea they were saying reluctant goodbye.

Arlen put a hand on his own child and said, "Karrash is going to stay on Kashyyyk and help the Wookiee resistance."

"But not Lowbacca?"

"He wants to make sure the Jedi and those Alliance troops get out of here safe. He promised Admiral Slossar that."

"Will he be able to get back to Kashyyyk afterward?"

Arlen shrugged ambiguously, then squeezed her shoulder. "Thank you for this."

"I just hope I don't regret it."

"I'm glad, and not just for the obvious reasons." He smiled softly. "It means I finally get to meet this granddaughter of mine."

"I thought that *was* the obvious reason."

"One of them. Sneaking a bunch of Jedi and Alliance troops out of Sith territory is good cause too. Thank you, Marin."

"Don't thank me just yet." Marin stepped away and turned for the chamber's exit. "Wait till we're having a nice family reunion on *Fast Start*, a long way from here. *Then* you can thank me."

Admiral Rulf Yage was clearly a man who wanted to savor the fruits of his victory in peace. The feint at Coruscant had allowed the Empire to successfully ensnare the Alliance at Caamas, bringing this war to a shuddering end that no one save its architects had expected. Yage, a hard-nosed Imperial

patriot to the core, wanted to enjoy that end and the role he'd played in it. Instead he had a Sith Lord in his private office and couldn't muster the bravado to tell him to leave.

Darth Nihl found it all amusing. Vermin were pathetic creatures, convinced their profane power meant anything compared to the Force, and desperate to sustain the lie. At least they were useful.

"I'm glad you could join me, Lord Nihl," Yage lied. "Would you care for a drink?"

"Not necessary," said the Nagai. Yage refrained from pouring one for himself and stood beside his desk. Coruscant's gleaming daytime curve could be seen through the cabin's porthole windows, as well as several more Imperial star destroyers that had settled over the planet. More were on their way.

"You're to be congratulated on your accomplishments," Nihl told him, "But the battle isn't over yet."

Yage watched him guardedly. "The Alliance has surrendered. We still have to deal with hold-outs like Stazi, but the Core is ours."

"This war was never about the Alliance, Admiral. It was always about the *Jedi*."

"That is... a point of view." Yage's right brow twitched. "The emperor has ordered us on a diplomatic mission be sent to Ossus. The Jedi are to be interdicted but not harmed."

"The Jedi have been as critical to this war. They've been the Alliance's most effective, most *lethal* troops. Are you really comfortable with granting them blanket amnesty just because of Roan Fel's family ties?"

"I'm a servant of the Empire. I follow my orders."

The Empire would be Lord Krayt's soon. After the retreat from Coruscant Nihl had communicated with his master and told Krayt everything. Many Jedi were indeed falling back to Ossus, including Kol Skywalker's band from Coruscant. Many were also unaccounted for; likely they were already going into hiding. Krayt had dispatched packs of hunters to Wookiee space and other regions where Jedi were known to be clustered.

Because the Jedi had been purged before, they'd know their best hope now was to scatter. Skywalker's band would likely evacuate all the people, records, and precious Jedi treasures from the ancient temple on Ossus before spreading out across the stars. If that happened they'd turn into poisonous flitgnats, endlessly harassing the Sith as they built the galaxy anew. That could not be allowed. There would never so many Jedi in one place again. They had to be eliminated now.

"Your orders," Nihl said, "Have changed. You are to prepare *War Hammer* for battle."

Yage's brows drew together. "I've been given no such order."

"You're being given it now."

"I do not take orders from Sith."

Yage and the rest of his officers would very soon, and Nihl hoped his attitude improved then. For the moment he was correct, so Nihl obligingly said, "Contact the grand admiral. I'm sure Veed will confirm my orders."

Yage didn't hesitate to do so. He turned on the private transponder built into his desk and hailed the flagship *Imperious*. Nihl waited patiently until the shrunken holo-image of Morlish Veed appeared over Yage's desk.

Yage snapped a firm salute and said, "Admiral, I am presently over Coruscant with Darth Nihl and preparing to depart for Ossus on a diplomatic mission, per Emperor Fel's orders. Nihl says parameters have changed and that I am now to prepare for a combat operation. Is that correct, sir?"

Veed's holographic eyes flicked to Nihl, then back to Yage. He'd given no such order but was good at concealing surprise. The grand admiral was faced with an obvious choice: pretend he'd given those orders, and thus cast his lot with the Sith, or admit he hadn't and throw in with Fel.

But then, it wasn't really a choice. Veed had sided with the Sith before he'd even known the Sith were involved.

With admirable aplomb, Veed said, "The order was mine, Admiral Yage. You're to go to Ossus battle-ready."

"Understood, sir. What are your instructions for when I arrive?"

“Form a perimeter around the planet. Allow no ships to leave.” Veed’s eyes darted back to the Sith. “From there, you’re to follow Lord Nihl’s instructions.”

Nihl cold barely hold back a grin. Yage saluted once more. “Very good, sir.”

The holo shut down. Silence fell between Yage and Nihl as they regarded each other across the room.

Nihl allowed himself to smile. “Be happy, Admiral. Right now, you’re just a victor. Very soon you’ll be a hero of the Empire.”

Kol Skywalker hadn’t been on Ossus for nearly six months, and this was the worst kind of return. The Jedi evacuated from Coruscant found the academy in a state of barely constrained chaos. Per Roan Fel’s order, many Jedi had already converged on Ossus from nearby systems. More were on the way; others were pointedly ignoring the ultimatum and finding places to hide.

Kol had given no general instruction to the Order. He’d passed word to Master K’Kruhk to begin evacuating the temple of everything: the people, the equipment, the precious archives and artifacts. Beyond that he’d said nothing. Partially, he was afraid a message to all the Jedi would be intercepted by the Empire. If they heard him warn Jedi away from Ossus he’d invite the worst kind of punishment. Mostly, though, it was because he did not believe he should. Since the failure of the Ossus Project he felt like he’d been subjected to a mounting barrage of defeats. He’d called on Jedi to be warriors when they should have been peacekeepers. He’d allowed his mother to be trapped and killed and done nothing to stop his brother from leaving the Order. And all the while he’d been blind to the Sith threat. When Lowbacca had stepped down as head of the Jedi Council he’d done it, so he said, to bring in young blood and new ideas. Kol had brought both, and with them, so he’d told himself, a new hope for the Jedi, the Yuuzhan Vong, the Alliance, and the galaxy as a whole.

It had all been vanity. Kol saw that now. He’d been unable to refute Admiral Petan’s last harangue because the man had

been right. His idealism had been egotism disguised, and because of the lies he'd told himself he'd doomed the galaxy to the darkest times since Palpatine. Growing up he'd heard the story of Anakin Skywalker and never understood how his ancestor could have turned his back on the Jedi and mercilessly worked toward their destruction.

Understanding came, sickening and brutal, that Kol had recreated Anakin's betrayal not through malice but vanity. He'd never felt more disgusted with himself. He wanted nothing more than to disappear.

He hadn't the strength to stand in front of the Jedi he'd led astray and pretend he knew how to lead them. It was hard enough to face his son. Kol found Cade with the other apprentices in the upper pyramid. They ranged in age from small children to stretched-tall teenagers. They'd all heard news of the Alliance's surrender and they all felt the clamor in the temple around them, but only Cade and other older apprentices really understood it all.

Kol drew his son away from the group and led him down to the habitat section. The rooms they'd shared had been Cade's alone for the past six months and the young man had left them appropriately messy, like any normal teenager across the galaxy. Something about that ached Kol.

"So what *are* we going to do now, Dad?" Cade tried to sound brave, but he couldn't hide the quaver in his voice.

Kol put both hands on Cade's shoulders. "We can't trust Roan Fel to keep his word. We're going to evacuate the Jedi Temple."

"Where will we go?"

"We haven't figured out everything yet. But we're going to have to scatter."

"What about the other apprentices?"

He was thinking of his friends, of Shado and Azlyn and the rest. Like any teenager he dreaded being separated from his friends. Kol exhaled; there was really only one place the apprentices would be safe. "I've set up a hiding place for Jedi. A hidden temple. I'll send you and all the other apprentices these."

"Where is it?"

Kol smiled weakly. "You'll find out. As soon as we evacuate."

He thought Cade might object. Instead his son grinned and said, "I get it. Top-secret, huh?"

"Exactly. Unfortunately, there's a lot of valuable secrets in on Ossus. Holocrons, star charts, things the Sith would love to get their hands on. We have to make sure we take those with us."

"I get it, Dad. But... do you really think the Sith are coming here? Do you think the emperor would let them?"

"I don't know *what* Fel would let the Sith do. I don't think it matters either."

Again he was struck by how thoroughly and perfectly the Sith had manipulated this war. They'd used Kol's vanity and Fel's pride to make the Skywalker line war upon itself. No matter how hard he searched Kol didn't see any way he could have avoided leading the Jedi to ruin, save not leading at all. Yet he'd never considered that. Rather, it had seemed his destiny to follow the example of his ancestors and guide the whole Jedi Order in the way of the Force.

Maybe that had doomed them from the start. Maybe the Force itself was the traitor, maliciously forcing its servants to war on each other century after century while hapless trillions died in the crossfire.

"Dad?" Cade squeezed his arm. "Are you okay, Dad?"

Kol exhaled. "I'm sorry, son. There's just... a lot going on."

"Yeah. I get that." To avoid looking at his father Cade looked around the room. "You want me to start packing?"

"Absolutely." Grateful for an out, Kol patted Cade's shoulders. "We can't take everything, just the important things."

"I get it, Dad. Jedi are supposed to travel light."

"Exactly. Get to work. I'll be back later."

Escaping his son didn't help Kol much. He returned to the lower levels of the pyramid, where the evacuation process was beginning. He was reminded of the prelude to Admiral Keelu's attack three years ago, and it almost seemed as though things had come full circle. That was an illusion.

Things had gotten far worse. The enemy coming for them now would not be swayed, and the Jedi had no friends who'd come to rescue them. They did not even know when the enemy was coming or how. Kol planned to stay until absolutely everything was packed and be on the last transport out; it was the least he could do.

The halls were busy, as much with non-Jedi as Jedi. Most of the ones who'd been with the Alliance forces during the surrender had been allowed to escape, and many of those had been accompanied by Alliance soldiers who weren't ready to stop fighting. It was a far cry from Palpatine's purge, when Jedi had been gunned down by their own troops. He tried to take comfort in that.

Kol found K'Kruhk near the archives. With his huge size and conical hat the Whiphid was easy to spot, but he was a carefully guarded presence in the Force. The ancient master had lived through one calamitous Jedi purge, and Kol could only imagine what he must be feeling as they stood on the brink of another.

The Whiphid's small eyes got a little wider when he spotted Kol. "Ah, Master Skywalker. I am glad to see you."

Amazingly, he sounded honest. "How are the archives?"

"They will take a while to move, I'm afraid. What we really need are *ships*. We've been putting out calls for help from beings we can trust... Not all are responding."

Kol nodded grimly. Evacuating Jedi in tight spots was what Nat and Marin had been doing for the past year, but best he knew they were stuck at Kashyyyk. He had no idea how they were handling the surrender. He only knew that they were alive; the faint thing inside Kol bound to his brother still remained.

"If you have a moment, I'd like to speak to you in private," he told K'Kruhk.

"Of course," the Whiphid said, and as they moved through the halls he added, "I had something I wished to tell you also."

"What is it?"

"I will let you go first."

They made their way up several levels, wound through several hallways, and finally reached an empty sitting room that opened onto a shallow stone balcony. When they stepped onto it the temple's great bulk rose above them and below, and in all other directions the jungle of Ossus spread out. For almost all Kol's life the view from the Temple has been an arid desert left over by the ravages of a four-thousand-year-old supernova. With the Ossus Project he'd made it as lush as Zonama Sekot. At the time it had felt like the greatest accomplishment of his life. Now he knew it as an act of hubris. He hated this beautiful view; it rose bile in his throat.

"So," K'Kruhk said politely, "What did you wish to say?"

Kol gladly focused his attention on the Whiphid. "Master, I plan on staying until last transport leaves Ossus."

"The Imperials may attack at any time."

"I'm aware. But I have to stay."

K'Kruhk nodded once.

"Master, the padawans will have to go to the hidden temple. Tili Qua doesn't know where it is, but you do. You must guide them there."

K'Kruhk made a thoughtful rumble. "Very well. What else should go to Taivas?"

"The archives. Every holocron and artifact we can more. You must oversee that too."

"There are over two hundred knights and masters in the temple and twice as many helpers."

"And they can't go to Taivas. For all we know the Empire slipped spies into the Alliance troops our people brought back with them. For now, only our most valuable things go to the hidden temple. The archives and the younglings."

"Our past, and our future."

"Exactly. Depending on what happens, we may draw more later."

"It is possible Fel will honor his word and not attack Ossus."

For a moment Kol was shocked the old master could be so naïve. Perhaps he was trying to make Kol feel better. "We must plan for the worst," he said simply.

"I agree," K'Kruhk nodded. "I'll do as you ask."

"Good." When the Whiphid didn't go back inside he remembered. "You had something to tell me."

"Yes. But I think it may be best to show you, so you may judge for yourself. Please stay here. I won't be long."

Kol did as he was told and watched K'Kruhk go inside. Guessing-games weren't the old master's style and Kol tried to keep his frustration in check. He glanced repeatedly at the blue sky, half-expecting TIE fighters to swoop down and rain death. It would almost be a relief when they did, far better than waiting. But not yet, Kol told himself. Not until Cade was safe.

When the door to the temple opened a Yuuzhan Vong walked onto the balcony. He had a plain face, unmarked by scars or tattoos. He knew Nei Rin was offworld and this wasn't one of her new bodyguards. Then he recalled this one's name. Khat Lah, who'd gone with Nat and his mother to Mustafar.

There was a curious vulnerability in the warrior's eyes. Yuuzhan Vong had their own kind of pride, and Kol understood that Khat Lah had been avoiding him, purposely and for so long, out of shame for having failed to save Jade. He could feel that shame burning off Khat Lah now, but also a tender bravery and desire to be judged for his faults.

Kol started. He could *feel* this Yuuzhan Vong in the Force, as clearly as he'd just felt K'Kruhk. If anything he was more clear, because he hadn't the skill of hiding his emotions.

"How," Kol asked, "are you *possible*?"

Khat Lah's tense expression slipped to weak smile. "I have been asked that many times recently. Most often by myself. Finally, I have some answers."

And so Khat Lah explained everything: How he'd been touched by Sekot at the start of this war, how he'd yearned to understand the Jedi and know the Force since he was young, how he'd surrendered those desires on Mustafar and found brief enlightenment, only to fail in saving Jade Skywalker. Yet that understanding, the touch of Sekot, and Jade's dying flare of pure Force power had combined to awaken in Khat Lah the connection with the Force his people had lost eons

ago. He explained further that he was able to touch the Force without using the midi-chlorians that bound both Jedi and Sith to the cosmic power-flow. Sekot theorized that his connection was more pure and direct, as it had been with the Yuuzhan Vong and Yuuzhan'tar before their fall from grace.

His tale staggered Kol. Everything else evaporated: the rush to evacuate, the looming Sith, three years of warfare and the bitter knowledge he'd done more damage to the Jedi than anyone since Darth Vader, and all through the vanity of good intentions.

But all of that dissolved. In his heart he fell back years and years to when he'd been a small child. He remembered when Jaina Solo had taken him out into the wastes of Zonama Sekot's southern hemisphere. They'd sat down on a hilltop and stared at the withered sapling of a dying bora tree. The old woman had called on the Force within her and passed it on to the sapling. Though she'd never been a healer- too often the Sword of the Jedi had been anything but- Jaina had given of herself to feed life into that struggling plant, turning it green and strong. To the child Kol had been that was a miracle, and he'd never felt so in awe. At that moment he'd known, without a doubt, that through the Force anything was possible.

That memory would have been bitterly painful minutes ago, just like everything else. Now Kol felt all that awe and wonder return. The Force was all life and all life was the Force, and even at this dire hour it could gift him beauty and surprise. That it was beyond his understanding only enhanced the gift.

Khat Lah was taken wholly offguard when Kol pulled him into a tight embrace. The Yuuzhan Vong's arms twitched at his sides until Kol pulled away, hands still on the warrior's shoulders.

"There is so much I still don't understand," Khat Lah said. "But there's also so much I wish to do. I am only beginning to learn--"

"I know," Kol said. "And you will have a chance to learn all of that. I promise."

"I... am grateful for your forgiveness, Master Skywalker."

"You have nothing to be forgiven for. A little bit of my mother lives on in you. I feel that." He grinned easily. "She told me once that the Force is a *living* Force. By touching it we're becoming part of something so beyond ourselves that we can never pass away."

"I hope that is true." Khat Lah tried his own tentative smile.

"I know it is." He squeezed the warrior's shoulders, then released. "But you're right, we have so much left to do. We need to evacuate the temple, scatter, and regroup. There's fragments of the Alliance navy out there too. We'll have to find them."

"I seem to have returned at... an interesting time."

"I'm glad you did. More glad than you can ever know."

With one hand still on Khat Lah's shoulder, Kol led him back inside the temple.

After they'd escaped from Caamas and the giddy thrill of victory finally ebbed, hard realities settled in. The survivors in Gar Stazi's ragtag Alliance fleet had to survey their damaged ships and count their dead. Worse, they had to take in grim news reports of the Alliance's full surrender.

There was no warm warren waiting for Jaius Yorub anymore. The empire would commit to hunting them and they'd committed to being chased. That was true for them all, and he struggled to avoid the trap of self-pity.

He'd expected Admiral Stazi to be an exemplar of strength he usually was, but something had changed since the flight from Caamas. As he and Yorub sat in the office aboard *Indomitable*, discussing plans for the future, every aspiration seemed to hit a wall. They needed to repair their damaged ships, and no neutral world would service them for risk of the Empire's wrath. They needed more people and vessels, but any attempt to recruit from the surrendered Alliance navy would also bring the Empire down on them. As option after option came to nothing it seemed like all they had now was all they could ever have: a straggling collection of battered ships and broken soldiers drifting through empty space, unable to help themselves let alone the millions of worlds now firmly under the Empire's heel.

This was the point where Stazi would normally have said something rousing. Instead the Duro slumped in his chair and ran a hand across his hairless head. "It seems we are alone in this, Jaius."

"We've fought lonely fights before." Yorub tried to sound cheering, but it was hollow.

"Never one like this. We have no place to fall back to. No one to trust."

"We can't surrender, Admiral. Especially now."

"I'm well aware. But we can't seem to do anything *else* either."

Yorub's mind groped for distant possibilities. From the scraps of information they'd picked off the news-nets, no Alliance worlds had refused to recognize the Empire's victory. Not a one. Their collective timidity galled but wasn't wholly surprising. They'd gone into this war without enthusiasm and suffered for a cause they hadn't really believed in. Fel promised to be a generous victor besides.

But that was now, when everyone was tired of war and the realities of a galaxy-spanning Imperial occupation hadn't set in. They would, and Fel was not the only victor here. His Sith allies were also involved, and in the past two years Stazi's fleet had battled Sith-led armies enough to know the Empire's Force-users were much nastier beasts than the Jedi.

No one was chafing yet, but they would.

"We're not alone, sir. We can't be."

"And how do you know that?"

"If we're alone than all the hundreds of trillions of beings across the galaxy, all the people who voted for senators and made our democracy function, never really matter. They never meant it. They never cared. But they *did* care, sir. Admiral Nict and lots more like him died trying to stay free. And that was just at Caamas. There's got to be more like them all across the galaxy."

Stazi was unmoved. "The Empire is offering them peace. Most of them will take it in exchange for a boot on their necks, especially if Fel uses a relatively soft touch."

"But will he, sir? This isn't just about Fel, this is about the Sith. The Jedi say Palpatine was one of them. The Sith were

behind the Empire at its worst. Once the galaxy sees what the Sith are capable of, they're going to want their boot off their necks."

Stazi regarded him carefully. "That may take time."

"I know. We can lay low and listen. We can wait, even if it takes months. Or years. People will get fed up living under the Empire, and when they start struggling the Sith will try to strike them down hard. We'll be there to defend them. We'll give them *hope*, sir."

"And because we've laid low for so long, the Empire won't see us coming." A tiny smile tugged Stazi's lips.

"For now we have to focus on patching up our hurt. Then we'll wait, and we'll get the chance to act. Probably sooner than later."

"I suspect you are right." Stazi drummed his desktop. "That still leaves hurdles. We need repairs. The closest unoccupied shipyards are in Hutt Space, and those slugs would sell us to the Imps as soon as look at us. I think--"

The communicator on Stazi's desk pinged. When he looked at the readout his eyes narrowed.

"What is it, sir?"

"A private message. Recorded by Admiral Slossar."

The Fourth Fleet had surrendered at Randon. All the news-nets confirmed it. "Do you want me to leave?" asked Yorub.

"No. Let's hear what he has to say."

Stazi tapped a button and a blue holo-image appeared above his desk. Admiral Slossar's serpentine Sluissi form was a fraction of its real size and the recorded image spoke to an empty bulkhead.

"I pray you get this message, Admiral Stazi. I also pray the Imperials don't intercept and decrypt it. My life is forfeit if I do. I am about to surrender the Fourth Fleet to them and all the worlds we've defended. I wish I could join you wherever you are, but that is not possible.

"I offer you this instead. The Wookiees on Kashyyyk will not submit to an Imperial yoke again. They've offered formal surrender and say they will comply, but they will resist in secret. And if the Empire tries to burn their world or enslave them, they'll resist in the forests, on the beaches, in the skies.

I managed to ship some of our weapons and equipment down to Kashyyyk to further their cause.”

Stazi leaned forward, captivated. Yorub felt something faint but warm inside. It was the hope they’d needed.

Slossar’s message continued. “I’ve also arranged to smuggle some of my soldiers out of occupied Wookiee space. They’re die-hards, Admiral, and they want to fight with you. I’ve arranged for about forty thousand men and women to escape. If all goes to plan, they’ll be in the Hypori System in seven days. I’m hoping you’ll have a ship to meet them.

“And I’ve got one more gift, if you need it.” The admiral smiled faintly. “You probably need to patch yourself up after Caamas. I know beings who can help you at Sluis Van. The Empire’s going to be taking over our shipyards, I’m sure, but we’ve been expanding facilities to nearby systems, ones the Imperials don’t know about yet. I’m attaching contact information and encryption keys for a friend of mine, an administrator in one of those shipyards. Talk to him. He’ll get you patched up quietly. Then you can do what you need to against the Imps.

“Keep fighting the good fight, Admiral. I wish you the best.” Slossar’s long body straightened. He raised a hand to his head in salute. Stazi, still in his chair, returned the gesture. Then the holo winked out.

Stazi shot out of his seat, jarring Yorub to stand up too. “Jaius,” the admiral snapped, “Detail one cruiser, good condition, to be in Hypori in seven days.”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“The rest of us will make our way to Sluis Van. We’ll travel slowly, using old hyperlanes the Imperials won’t be patrolling. We’ll verify Admiral Slossar’s contact- though I’m sure it’s legitimate- and then-”

He paused. Yorub filled in for him. “We’ll hold back and wait. And when worlds start getting sick of the Empire’s boot, we’ll be there to knock it away.”

“Well put,” the admiral smiled.

“I like the sound of that, sir. And frankly, the rest of your soldiers need to hear it too. Morale has been down and they need to know you’ve got a plan.”

"I agree." Stazi moved for his desk's comm system and stopped. "Of course, it was mostly Slossar's plan. And *yours*. Stop being modest, Jaius. You deserve to brag now and then."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir, but I think you should do the honors. It'll mean a lot more from you."

"You make a valid point." The Duro paused a long moment to gather his thoughts, then stabbed the desktop controls. "All ships, this is Gar Stazi, last admiral of the Galactic Alliance. First, I want to thank you. That you are here with me now means you are all beings of intense bravery and dedication. You risked your lives to keep the flame of liberty alive. Many of our comrades risked the same and paid the final price. We will honor them all.

"I know this is a confusing time for you all. I know you may be feeling weariness and despair. I have felt it myself. But I want you to know the cause is not lost. We do have a future. I have located a shelter that will take us in and repair our ships. Further, I have been in contact with other Alliance officers who have obeyed the surrender order but not given up the fight. Even now they are smuggling weapons, equipment, and soldiers through Imperial lines with the goal of joining us. Remember this. Cling to it. We are *not* alone.

"So we will gather our allies. We will repair our damage and recoup our losses. And then, my friends, we will wait. Too many in the Alliance welcome the Empire's rule because they are weary of war. That will change. They will remember what the Empire stood for in the beginning, what our ancestors rose up and defeated. The Empire stands for oppression disguised as peace, liberty sold for security, and brutality in the name of safety. You know that already. In time the rest of the galaxy will remember it too. I expect it to be sooner than anyone expects, especially the supposedly-reformed Empire."

Stazi threw in a contemptuous snort there and brought it home. "The founders of the Galactic Alliance fought against even greater odds than ours. They rose from nothing to slay two Death Stars. We will honor their heroism by repeating it. Hold fast to that hope, my friends, and one day the galaxy

will know true safety, liberty, and peace. My friends, we will make that galaxy, together. Good night.”

Stazi tapped his comm controls, ending the broadcast. Yorub stood on the other side of the desk, arms crossed.

“Well? What did you think?”

“I think,” said Yorub, “That was a damned fine speech.”

“I thought so too,” said Stazi, with unveiled pride. “And Jaius, I could not have done it without you.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Torn Station was one of those interstellar waystations that had endured generations, passing through successive owners who preferred to lay low and let commerce legal and illicit run its course. As one of the few truly neutral locations in the area, the war had turned it into a clustering point for dozens of civilian ships that wanted out of the Imperial-Alliance fracas. Now that the war was officially over some were attempting to slip away, mostly on a Coreward hyperspace route toward Umbara, but plenty still remained. *Fast Start* was a large ship, but it didn't look out of place as it docked with the uppermost of Torn Station's three stacked discs.

Arlen could feel his daughter's relief as she stepped onto the deck of what was, put simply, her home. For Arlen it was less familiar but even more welcome. For too long he'd felt estranged from Marin and her life; now he was in her home, following her down its gray utilitarian hallways. He felt closer to her than he had in thirty years, maybe more.

Marin led them from the airlock portal down to a large hold. Storage crates were stacked along the edges but great space had been cleared in the center. A single man stood there, black-haired and round-faced, datapad in hand. Arlen hung politely behind Marin as she went up to her husband and embraced Benet in a long, strong hug.

When they were finally done Marin stepped back and, with one arm still on his shoulders, swung toward Arlen. "Benet," she said, "I'd like you to meet Arlen Fel. Also known as 'Dad.'"

If the younger man was annoyed to have been pulled into this danger zone, he gave no sign at all. Benet extended a hand. "It's an honor to meet you."

"Been a long time coming," Arlen smiled and shook. "Thank you for coming all this way. You didn't have to."

"I think I did." Benet smiled sideways at Marin. "You know, when all this started, I was the one encouraging her to get involved."

"Things happen," Arlen said. "Sometimes people have to reevaluate their priorities."

"Not me," piped Marin. "We're going to get these Jedi and Alliance people loaded up, offload 'em someplace else, and then we're taking a vacation. All four of us."

"A vacation?" Benet looked amused. "Where?"

"We'll think of some place. I'm thinking sand and beaches and no people. *Shab*, if Mom wants to, she can come too."

Arlen crossed his arms. "What about the rest of her relatives?"

"There I'm drawing a line. Nobody wants to see Mekk in a bathing suit."

Benet probably didn't get the reference, but he smiled anyway. "We'd better get loaded up first."

"Right." Marin patted his shoulder. "Everything's set out there. We're ready when you are."

"Then let's get to work," Benet agreed.

He ushered Marin and Arlen to the side of the great chamber, then worked his datapad. The bulkhead on the opposite end split in half and opened wide, revealing the storage bay on Torn Station where thousands of Admiral Slossar's bitter-enders had gathered. They started piling in immediately, bringing with them whole crates of supplies ferries on repulsor-sleds. Most of the Alliance soldiers had changed into plainclothes to be less conspicuous, but they still had the hard eyes of weary soldiers.

Benet was taken aback by their sheer numbers. "How many are there?"

"Between thirty and forty thousand," Arlen said. It was a lot more than Slossar had promised. Apparently he'd gotten an excess of volunteers. "How many can you take?"

"I don't know," Benet admitted. "I mean, we're built to carry more than that in terms of raw weight, but we've never had so many *people* before. They're going to need water and food, refreshers..."

"They've brought a lot of the first two. Sanitation might get a little tricky. Hopefully they won't be with you for long."

"Do you have any idea how to find Stazi?"

"Admiral Slossar gave us a few ideas."

"We've scrounged up a few smaller ships too," Marin added. "If we can get twenty, twenty-five thousand here, that'll be good."

Benet nodded soberly. "I just hope the Imps don't want to inventory this thing themselves."

"If they do, you'll have to run."

"This isn't a blockade runner."

"I know. Mom and her Mandos are here too. They can help run interference if it comes to that."

Benet didn't look thrilled at the prospect and Arlen could hardly blame him. It would take several hours to import all the Alliance personnel onto *Fast Start* and there was still a lot that could go wrong.

But before any of that, there was something Arlen had to do. His daughter knew that too. She asked Benet, "Where's Ania?"

"I told her to stay in her cabin while this place floods with strangers."

"Good idea." Marin looked to Arlen. "You ready?"

"I've been ready," he replied.

After thanking Benet one more time they left him in the hold to oversee the loading of all those Alliance passengers. Marin led him back into the maze of same-looking corridors and up several levels via lift. It struck Arlen, who'd made *Starlight Champion* into something of a home, that this was a great big ship for three people. He wondered what it must be like for his granddaughter to grow up on it with only her parents and droids for company and a new port to call at every few days. He suspected Ania would be very restless when she grew up.

When they reached the door to Ania's room Marin knocked, and second later a girl's faint voice bid them enter. Marin walked through, Arlen followed. Like the rest of this ship it was bare and functional with harsh gray bulkheads. A single porthole widow looked out on the stars. It didn't seem to him like a little girl's room, but then Marin had grown up in the Jedi academy on Bastion, also a spartan place.

And then there was Ania, standing in the middle of it, looking inquiringly up at her mother and this strange old man she'd brought with her. Ania had black hair and a round face like her father, but there was something of Marin in there too, especially the eyes. They were curious eyes, questioning and a little distrustful. And restless eyes, he thought. Definitely like her mother's.

Marin dropped to one knee and hugged her daughter fiercely. "I've missed you so much, kid."

"Thanks, Mom." Ania squirmed a little in the vice-grip.

When Marin finally released her she waved a hand at Arlen. "I've got a surprise for you. This... is my father."

Ania blinked at him. "You're not the emperor," she said.

Arlen gaped. Marin chuckled and mussed her hair. "The emperor's my *cousin*, remember? This is just... call him Grandpa."

"Okay," Ania gamely tried it herself. "Grandpa."

It was enough to make an old man weak at the knees. Arlen bent over carefully and took Ania into another hug. This one was strong too and he could feel Ania squirm uncomfortably, but he honestly didn't care. He'd needed this family reunion for so long and now that it was here it seemed to erase everything. The long decades he'd spent growing old without any family, the fall of the Alliance and their uncertain future. Everything. Right now even the present calamity felt worth it, just to have this.

When he finally pulled away he wiped a few tears from his eyes and sniffed, "Nice to meet you, kid."

Ania looked a little uncertain, but she smiled.

Arlen looked around the plain room. "So. This is your home."

Ania simply nodded.

He squeezed her shoulders. "Tell you what. Your dad's busy in the main hold, but how about you give me a little tour of this place? I bet you know your way around every nook and cranny on this ship."

She looked a little embarrassed, but nodded again.

"Just stay out of the way if you run into any, ah, new cargo," Marin warned.

"I'm sure we'll manage just fine," said Arlen. He stood up straight but squeezed one of Ania's hands in his own. "I'll let my guide lead the way."

Marin took them both in. She, too, couldn't keep from smiling. "Take care of your grandfather," she told Ania. "He'd old and gets a little fuzzy in the head sometimes, so make sure he doesn't get lost."

Arlen gave her a look, but Ania nodded dutifully.

"Anyway, I'll check with Benet, then head back out," Marin told her father. "Make sure everything's getting loaded properly on *Starlight Champion*."

"Good. You might as well prep her for flight and take off when you're ready."

Marin blinked. "What about you?"

"I think I'll stay here with my guide." He squeezed Ania's hand. "Besides, I saw how you flew that ship on Randon. You're much better with her than I am, now that I'm all fuzzy in the head."

"Fair enough. I'll keep in touch and let you guys know when I'm ready to launch. Hopefully we can push out together."

"That sounds like a plan."

Marin looked back to her daughter. "I'll see you soon, Ania. Keep your grandpa in line while I'm gone."

"I'll try," the girl said gamely.

Marin chuckled, threw them a wave and warm smile, then slipped through the door and was gone.

Savoring the warm glow he felt inside, Arlen looked down at Ania and said "Well, Miss Solo, please lead the way."

After passing through *Fast Start*'s umbilical airlock Marin wound her way back to the cargo room on Torn Station from

which the Alliance soldiers were flowing. There were still plenty of people left to move, but Benet and his assistant droids seemed to have it in hand.

She left the chamber and took a lift tube that pulled her toward the center of the station's upper disc, transferred to another that shot her down to the middle disc, and finally a third that brought her to its edge. Torn Station was laid out so heavy carriers like *Fast Start* coupled with the outer discs while smaller vessels berthed in hangars on the central one. It was an arrangement designed to prevent messy traffic, but it also had meant it took her some fifteen minutes to get from her own ship to her father's.

Starlight Champion wasn't the only ship docked in this hangar. *Runaround* was here, and she'd temporarily donated it to Master Grolik, his apprentice Omwrak, and several other Jedi. The *Bottom Line* sat slightly forbidding in one corner, though some Alliance troops had been packed in with the Mandalorians. A handful of other scrounged-up civilian ships both larger and smaller than *Champion* took up the rest of the hangar. Plainclothes Alliance soldiers buzzed around the deck, hauling cargo into ships. It was busy, but less busy than when Marin had last seen it. Hopefully things were wrapping up and they could get out of here soon.

Marin spotted Master Lowbacca at the entrance to the transport beside *Champion*. The Wookiee was roaring, growling, and throwing around shaggy arms to get his point across to some Alliance people who clearly didn't get Shyriiwook. Marin waited until he was done and the crowd dispersed to approach.

"They're loading up *Fast Start* now," she told him. "My dad's staying aboard."

Lowbacca roared and gestured to *Champion*. Marin's Shyriiwook wasn't great either but she got the idea.

"He's leaving that to me. I'll take it out with Nat. Sorry, Bantha."

The Wookiee nodded approval and made for Arlen's ship. Marin followed him inside and, just like everything else, it was packed with foreign bodies eager for safe passage out of here. They made their way to the cockpit and found Nat in

the co-pilot's seat running checks. He was accompanied by two Jedi, the Zabrak apprentice Soht Lenar and the Cathar Zho Tuum, who towered almost as high as Lowbacca.

"How's it coming?" Marin asked them.

"Basically, we're ready to go," Nat said.

"How many people aboard?"

"Twenty-eight, plus you two. And only one refresher, I should point out."

"Well, this won't be a long trip. Hopefully."

"Any idea where we're going yet?" Nat swung his gaze toward Lowbacca, wondering if it was time to fall back to Taivas.

The Wookiee shook his head and said that they needed to get out of Imperial space first. That was tricky, given that just about *everywhere* was Imp territory now. He suggested they try and slip Rimward toward Hutt Space, which should be suitably lawless enough for them to lay low and try to contact Stazi's fleet.

"Do you plan for us all to join Stazi's forces?" asked Soht Lenar.

Marin fully intended to unload all these soldiers and go on vacation, but she waited for Lowbacca's response. From his series of growls and murmurs, she gathered that he hoped to speak to Stazi himself, then make that decision.

Soht and Zho Tuum nodded obediently. Nat, bless him, said, "I'm just the escort service. I'm planning to lay low after this."

"Seconded," said Marin.

Lowbacca calmly said that this, too, was their choice, and the Jedi were thankful for all they'd done so far.

Marin was about to patch in a call to *Fast Start* and check their progress when something on Nat's sensor board pinged. He leaned close, checked it, and swore.

"We've got company," he growled. "Imperial frigate just dropped out of hyperspace. *Velox*-class."

Marin frowned. That was an old ship and not a big one. She'd expected them to send at least an *Ardent*-class to lay down the law here.

"We must stay calm," Zho Tuum purred. "Are they hailing the station?"

"Think so. Can't pick up their transmission." Nat chewed his lip. "I'm pickin' up fighters too. Not just TIEs. Think they dropped out of hyperspace alongside the frigate..."

Lowbacca barked a question and loomed over Nat's chair.

"I've got a scan, but they're no model I've ever seen."

Lowbacca only had to glance at the readings to make his grim pronouncement.

"Sith fighters," Zho Tumm clarified. "They're called called Furies."

Everyone in the cockpit seemed to freeze as one. It wasn't just the shock of the Sith's arrival; they'd been half-waiting for it. Marin realized the dark-siders were reaching out, touching the Jedi and purposely instilling them with dread. Even Nat seemed stuck in place.

"Okay!" Marin snapped. "Time's up. We need to get out of here, *now*." She dropped into the pilot's seat and flicked on the comm with *Fast Start*. It routed directly to her husband's personal comlink and when the connection opened she could hear background clamor.

"Benet, do you hear me?"

"I read you. What's going on?"

"The Sith are here. Now. You need to pack up and get the hell out of here."

"Marin, we've got a lot of people left to load."

"Take off with that you have. Time's up."

"You're sure we can't bluff 'em?"

"Normal Imps maybe, not Sith."

"That frigate's pulling close to the station but it hasn't fired yet," Nat reported. "Those fighters are spreading out, loose formation."

"They are searching for us," Zho Tuum said. "How many?"

"Full dozen."

"If we try to run they'll gun us down," whispered Soht.

Yes and no, Marin thought. Ships like the *Bottom Line* were tough enough to get past a couple snubfighters, even ones with Sith pilots. *Starlight Champion*, maybe, if she did

everything right. *Fast Start* was too big a target and too slow. Its only hope was to punch out with as much cover fire as possible.

Lowbacca clearly had the same thought. He roared that he would go out and get the other ships ready to launch. If they all pushed out at the same time the Sith would have a hard time catching them all.

It was the best they could do. Marin turned to thank the Wookiee, but he was already hurrying out of the cockpit and out of the ship. While Nat began engine checks, the two Jedi went back in the hold and told the passengers to get ready for takeoff. Marin patched in a call to *Runaround*, telling Grolik the situation, then called her mother in the *Bottom Line*. The Mandos were aware of the danger and ready to punch out, but Marin warned them to hold position so they'd all break out as one. With Tamar's help, she got Mekt to comply. Then she checked with Benet. He was closing up *Fast Start*'s hold but had yet to get the engines going. They'd be at least five minutes to takeoff. He didn't know where Ania and Arlen were.

"The frigate's still holding position," Nat told Marin. "So are the Sith."

"Are they sniffing us out? Can you feel them?"

He nodded grimly. "Yeah, I feel 'em. Like something really cold on the back of my neck. I'm trying to make myself small so they can't feel me."

"At least they're not attacking."

"Yet. My guess is they're in fierce negotiations with that station owner."

"Nobody's supposed to know we're here."

"Yeah, but the man in charge's gotta have an idea." Nat looked anxiously around the thinning flight deck. "Wouldn't surprise me if local security doesn't try to lock us down."

"Well, they haven't yet. I think—"

Nat's board lit up again. "Ah, stang. Here we go."

"What?"

"A couple ships from the lower disc and trying to punch out."

"What ships?"

"I dunno. Somebody else got spooked by the Imps. They're running for it. Some of the Furies are trying to intercept."

Across the hangar, one ship pushed off on its repulsors and flared its engines. They'd seen their opened and were making a run for it. Marin reached for the comm board to tell them to stop, but the *Bottom Line* kicked off too, and then another freighter and another.

"Looks like we're jailbreaking," grunted Nat.

"*Fast Start*'s not ready to run."

"It'll have to be." Nat leaned over the punched on the comm. "Hey, Mandos, don't karking run yet! You're being paid for escort duty!"

"We've gotta go while they're distracted!" barked Mekk.

Marin said, "Mom, Ania and Dad are one that ship."

"Then we'll be their escort," Tamar said with finality. "You coming with us?"

"Yeah, why not?" Nat said. He quickly retracted the landing ramp, turned on repulsors, and brought engines online. "Just don't get too far ahead."

A few ships were pushing out of the hangar, her mother's among them. Marin didn't know where Lowbacca was, but he could take care of himself. Right now her family needed saving from the mess she'd gotten them into. She kicked in *Starlight Champion*'s engines. The ship lurched, shuddered, then shot out space.

Lowbacca watched engines flare and ships race out into black space. The hangar deck shuddered beneath him as scattered Alliance soldiers stampeded toward the remaining freighters. There would not be enough room to get everyone off, he knew, and rather than throw himself into the mad rush he remained where he was, feet on the deck, still among the fury.

He reached out in the Force and felt the other Jedi. He felt Grolik and Omwrak pushing out into space, their panic barely restrained. Arlen was further away, aboard *Fast Start* and trying to push free of the station. Most other Jedi had taken off, though he could feel Gen Konar aboard a Sullustan freighter that was struggling to close its ramp as desperate

would-be passengers tried to hold it down and climb aboard. More dimly he could feel Nat Skywalker with Tuum and Lenar, plus Marin's mother aboard the Mandalorian ship.

Some would escape, but not all. Lowbacca felt bleak calm come over him. For so long he'd wondered how his end would come. Spending his life among members of shorter-lived races he'd seen it come to them time after time, in all manner of ways. All his early friends were gone, their teachers gone longer. Of their children only Arlen was left. He felt his old apprentice's anxiety in the Force, like a distant star. He could tell Arlen was focused not on preserving his own life, or even the thousands of Alliance bitter-enders stuck in *Fast Start*'s hold. He only cared about saving the granddaughter's he'd finally gotten to meet.

But there was nothing Lowbacca could do about that. He watched the last few transports surge out of the hangar and into space. He could see lasers slanting through the hangar portal, and sometimes darting ships. Some were Jedi, some were not. A few TIE Predators seemed to have joined the Sith Furies in their attack, but he could not tell how the battle was going.

Then he first the felt ship die, taking a dozen lives with it. Grolik and Omwrak were gone in an instant, and *Runaround* with them. There'd be more to come.

The Alliance soldiers stranded on Torn Station were in a panic. Many were moving for the door that led deeper inside the station, though none of them knew what they'd do. Try to get another ship, or hide inside the station depths. Some might succeed, but Lowbacca felt a chill run down his spine and knew that the Sith had marked him as a target. There'd be no point in running from them.

He felt the hunters draw closer, felt them grow hungry. He watched as a pair of Sith Furies swung into view. They were angular ships with wings jabbing forward on either side of the cockpit like blunt knives, and the blades were aimed right at the hangar. He expected them to fire and blast the whole hangar out into space, but instead they decelerated, slipped through the atmospheric envelope, and dropped onto their extended landing gear in a shower of sparks.

Some Alliance troops rushed out of the hangar. Others dropped to their knees, took cover, and began firing. The Furies' cockpits popped open and the Sith came out as red-bladed tornados. Troopers sprayed laserfire and the Sith spat it back out, dropping several soldiers. One Sith somersaulted over a barricade of supply crates and nimbly cut down the three troopers behind it. The other spun on a standing trooper and cleaved her in half.

In between them, equidistant from both, was Lowbacca. His lightsaber slapped into his paw and its molten blade ignited. He gave a loud roar, drawing the Sith's attention and warning the Alliance troops to fall back and leave this fight to him.

The troopers complied without question. The Sith were eager to oblige. The Wookiee master hefted his lightsaber and gestured for them to come. They were both humans, young and eager for a challenge, and he intended to give it to them. Lowbacca had beaten far greater opponents. He hoped they sent more. He hoped he could draw as many as he could away from *Fast Start* and the other ships.

He hoped his stand bought as many lives as possible.

The Sith circled until they were on opposite flanks, then charged as one. Lowbacca was ready for them.

Fast Start pushed away from Torn Station and into chaos. The arrival of an Imperial frigate had sent not just the Jedi and their allies running but dozens of other ships, probably smugglers and low-lives who wanted to get away from authority's falling hammer. Arlen could see it through the cockpit viewport as Benet and a droid co-pilot angled the ship away from Torn Station's triple discs. TIE Predators and Sith Furies had clustered into groups to pursue fleeing spacecraft. The TIEs were firing indiscriminately, and Arlen winced as a bystander's SoroSuub yacht burst into flames. The Furies let some go but veered wildly to chase ships they could feel Jedi aboard.

Arlen tried to shield his presence, but there was no way he could block the frantic Force-presence of over ten thousand Alliance troops huddled in *Fast Start*'s hold. There was no

way the Sith would miss that. The big ship hauled slowly toward the exit vector, and it had no weapons of its own.

Ania hung to the back of her father's chair and peered over his shoulder. "Where's Mom?" the girl asked tensely. "Did she get away?"

Benet shook his head helplessly. The whole ship shuddered hard but kept moving, and Arlen's first thought was that they'd taken a stray bolt. Then alarmed wailed on the sensor board. Ania peered out the starboard side of the cockpit and stabbed a finger.

"Look at that one!" she gasped.

Benet and Arlen looked. The narrow-bodied *Velox*-class frigate cresting Torn Station's triple disc wasn't much bigger than *Fast Start*, but it was infinitely more deadly and heading straight for them. At the same time a Fury flashed in front of them and another explosion rocked the ship. Instead of recovering from the blast, *Fast Start* continued to tremor and Arlen could feel it begin to decelerate.

Benet swore and pounded the console. "What is it?" asked Arlen.

"Losing power to engines. I think one of the power conduits blew. Stang." He reached over to his comm board, flipped a switch, and nothing happened.

"Can we fix it?" asked Arlen.

"XG-7 can do it," Ania said immediately.

"Internal comms are out. I can't reach the droid," her father scowled.

"I'll do it!" the girl popped off the chair and hurried out of the cockpit.

Arlen instinctively went after her, though he knew he'd never matched the speed of a panicked twelve-year-old. Still, Ania kept the lift door open an extra two seconds so Arlen could step inside, then dropped them to lower decks.

"You don't have to come with me," the girl said, "I know every part of this ship." She seemed so much like Marin then.

"I'm just watching out for you," Arlen panted. Just that short sprint had left him winded.

When the door opened she was off again. The corridor was half-filled with confused Alliance troops who slowed Ania

down and slowed Arlen even more. The hall began to shake violently and Arlen had to brace both hands on the bulkhead to keep from falling.

Then there was an ever greater explosion. The deck seemed to slip away beneath Arlen and all the troopers rose slowly into the air. Up ahead, unseen, he heard Ania's wail of surprise.

Artificial gravity was down. Engines were probably broken beyond repair. Arlen reached out with the Force toward the cockpit and found nothing at all. He couldn't be positive, but in all likelihood it had been blasted away and Marin's husband was dead.

They'd all be dead soon. The Sith would have no interest in capturing all these Alliance renegades, only slaughtering them. Arlen found some calm center inside himself: he knew what he had to do. With the Force he pushed the hallway's drifting bodies to the wall, clearing a path. With zero gravity and the Force he could shoot faster down the hall than he ever could on his old man's legs. He found Ania on the far end, using sweat-sticky palms to pull herself across the wall to a door.

Arlen reached out, caught her with one arm, and steadied them both against the door. "Ania," he breathed, "Where are the escape pods?"

"B-But the engines... We have to--"

"The ship's dead in space! How do we get to the escape pods?"

Even in her confusion the girl knew the way. She slammed the door's control panel to open it, then pointed down the left branch of the corridor ahead. Arlen kept her body pinned to his with his right arm and used bursts from the Force to speed them along that corridor, then down another branch.

"We're going so fast," Ania breathed. "Are you a--"

"We'll go over that once we get out of here and hook up with our mom."

It would be madness shooting into battle in a little pod during a crazed battle full of Sith hunters, but it was the only choice they had. Arlen had survived crazier odds than this, he was sure of it, but none of them leaped to mind right now.

Ania directed them through one more door and one more turn. Arlen recognized this spot from his too-brief tour: a short narrow corridor with three small circular airlocks lined up on the far wall. Before they could get close the ship trembled again, knocking Arlen shoulder-first into the nearest bulkhead. The pain was so sharp he let go of Ania, but the girl gripped his sleeve to keep from drifting.

"Wait, wait!" she called.

"We have to go *now*!"

"What about Dad?"

Her couldn't tell Ania her father was dead, not now. "He'll catch up later."

"But how—"

Another tremor, different from the last one. It was strong enough that Ania lost her grip and began floating down the corridor. Arlen reached out with the Force, touched the controls for the center airlock and opened its portal.

The tremor wasn't abating. It was surging, growing closer and louder, and coming with it was the screaming sound of tearing metal. Arlen knew that sound: a catastrophic hull breach was rending the ship to pieces.

No hesitation, no fear. Arlen pushed with the Force one last time, guiding Ania into the escape pod. Then the corridor's outer bulkhead tore open. Air gushed through the lengthening seam into star-speckled black. Catastrophic decompression signaled emergency overrides and the escape pod's airlock sealed tight. Arlen thought he heard the muted bang of jettison charges shooting Ania's pod into space, but he wasn't sure. It didn't matter. He felt her in the Force, a beacon of panic, falling from one danger into another.

He'd done all he could. He could only hope it was enough. Arlen felt energy leave his body and stopped resisting the rush of oxygen emptying into void. He relaxed, closed his eyes, and let it take him away.

Lowbacca rolled beneath a lightsaber-slash, sprung up, and thrust his own blade backward. It speared through his opponent's back and out through his chest, a certain killing blow, but there was still one more Sith to kill. The Wookiee

master spun on one foot and brought his blade close in a defensive underhand grip. As he tugged it free it carved a deeper hole through the dead Sith's chest, and as Lowbacca prepared to face his second opponent the body of the first thumped hard onto the hangar deck.

Then he felt it. Arlen's death wasn't a painful, shrieking flare-out in the Force. It was a relinquishment, sudden but calm, and then the little piece inside Lowbacca that belonged to his former apprentice was gone.

In that second the Sith charged. Lowbacca was barely able to block his attack, and the Sith struck so fast and hard he was unable to bring his saber back into an overhand grip. He blocked strikes on instinct but the Wookiee suddenly felt so *tired*. After a hundred and fifty years he'd watched friends and loved ones die, generation after generation. He should never have listened to his uncle Chewbacca's tales of adventure among the stars. He should have stayed on Kashyyyk with Sirrakuk and his parents for a simple life among his own kind. In choosing to be a Jedi he'd doomed himself to this: loving and losing, over and over and over again.

Lowbacca was so sick and tired he was tempted to let the Sith strike him down now. Once he joined Arlen and all the others in the Force there's be no more loss.

The temptation came and passed in a second. He could still feel others out there who needed his help. He could also feel the eagerness of the Sith in front of him, convinced and elated he might be the one to slay a legendary Jedi Master.

Lowbacca let him think that. He shrunk from one attack, then another and another. The Sith pressed harder using heavy overhand swings. Lowbacca bent at the knees and let the weight of the blow press him down, then put his paws together, braced himself, and pushed back. Lightsabers crackled together. The Sith bent Lowbacca further backwards, putting two hands and all his weight on the hilt of his blade.

A Wookiee held more strength in one arm than a human held in both. He removed one paw from his lightsaber, grabbed the Sith's wrist, and pulled hard. The Sith lost

balance and his lightsaber skirted up and out across Lowbacca's blade. The Jedi, still holding it with an underhand grip, flicked his wrist and cut through the Sith's, severing hand from arm. Fist and saber fell to the deck. The human howled. Lowbacca pulled his blade back, punched, and tore a gaping hole in his enemy's waist. The body flailed to the deck and was still.

Panting, Lowbacca shut off his lightsaber and stood straight. The hangar had been emptied of everything except cooling bodies. Outside in space, laser still flared. He caught a fireball but was not sure of the source.

Jedi were still out there. He could feel Nat Skywalker's presence, thick with panic and grief.

Lowbacca turned his eyes to the twin Sith Furies sitting on the deck with cockpits open and seats empty. He sprinted for the nearest one.

When the Imperial frigate unleashed its first volley of concussion missiles, *Fast Start* had been helpless. The freighter's meager shields had already been softened by strafing runs from Sith Furies, and the frigate's warheads blew out one engine and left it lurching. Then a Fury had swooped down on its unshielded bow and launched a single warhead that vaped the cockpit instantly.

At that moment Marin had been banking *Starlight Champion* toward her husband's ship. When she saw the explosion her jaw had dropped, her hands gone weak at the throttle. Bantha, in the co-pilot's spot behind her, had reached out desperately with the Force while the frigate unleashed its second wave of missiles. He had no idea what Benet or Ania felt like in the Force, but in the clamor of frantic life aboard the freighter he'd found his old master, somehow still alive. He'd shouted that to Marin to get through her shock, and with grim resolve she'd taken the controls again and dove *Champion* toward the dying ship.

Then the second wave hit, tearing the hauler apart. Two engines exploded, rupturing the superstructure and splitting the outside hull. *Champion* had gotten close enough that Bantha could see the layered durasteel shell around the main

hold open up like ripped flimsy. He saw crates of equipment and bodies, so many bodies falling out into the void.

As it burned from both ends, *Fast Start* continued to break. It yawned open like an unhinged jaw, spilling a clod of debris so dense Bantha could no longer track individual bodies or scraps of wreckage. Marin was shocked beyond word, beyond thought, and they might have flown right into the cloud before two Furies dove instead, firing with their laser cannons, savagely vaporizing the dead and the dying. Marin jerked on instinct, pulling *Champion* up and around the dead ship.

As *Fast Start*'s gnarled body dropped out of view Bantha reached out for Arlen again. This time there was nothing.

The frigate was too close, and it began pumping turbolaser fire in their direction. Bantha knew in an instant that Marin was in no shape to fly. He took her by the shoulders and moved her out of the pilot's seat as gently as he could. The two Jedi behind him helped settle Marin in the co-pilot's seat while Bantha wrestled the controls and veered away from the frigate. Its laserfire went wide, but sensors still screamed alarm and their aft shields rocked.

"Two TIE Predators, right behind us," Zho Tuum reported. He leaned over Marin's shoulder to read her screens.

Bantha wrestled them into an evasive maneuver. Arlen had let him fly this ship back during his apprentice days, and it was coming back fast. It had to. The space around Torn Station was an absolute bedlam of Imp fighters and civvie ships scrambling to escape.

There seemed too many Imperials to have come from one little light frigate, but then he spotted a big gray wedge in the distance. *Ardent*-class frigate, probably. The Sith had finally brought their backup in, which meant they could pulverize the whole station if they wanted to.

Best if they didn't. Best if every Jedi got out of here right now. Maybe, just maybe, the Imperials would sense that and spare a station crammed with innocents destruction.

"Something just took out the TIEs," Zho Tuum announced. Finally some good news.

Bantha reached over for the comm, but it blared first. Marin's mother said, "This is *Bottom Line*. *Champ* do you read? Marin?"

"We're here!" Bantha barked. "Thanks for the help."

"*Fast Start*," Tamar fumbled. "Did they- Can you feel-"

"They're gone," Marin croaked. "They're *all* gone."

For three long seconds there was silence on the comm. Then Mekk's gruff voice said, "I don't wanna be a cold *chakaar*, but if we've got no ship to escort, can't we run?"

"Yes," Zho Tuum confirmed. "Do you have coordinates?"

"I got 'em. We'll form on your wing and get outta here."

"Sounds good," Bantha said and killed the connection. As he veered toward their exit vector something flashed in the side of his vision, and then heavy laserfire rocked their starboard shields.

"More fighters," Zho Tuum said. "Not TIEs. They're-"

"Furies," Marin said dully. "Three of 'em."

"Marin, can you take guns?" asked Bantha. "Marin?"

"I can do it," said the Cathar.

Marin half-fell out of the co-pilot's seat. Soht Lenar helped her into the chair behind it as Zho Tuum took her place. *Starlight Champion* had decent firepower but its laser turrets weren't much use against targets directly behind them. The three Sith were doing a great job staying in their blind spot. Off their starboard side, the *Bottom Line* engaged in wild turns and twists, some nearly colliding with *Champ*, all the while popping off shots from both ventral and dorsal turrets. Still the Sith stayed on them, peppering their aft shields with steady draining laserfire.

"One more Fury inbound," Zho Tuum growled. "Port side."

"Can you shoot it?" asked Lenar.

"I have the cannons now." The Cathar's big paws worked gunnery control. "It is almost in range."

Knowledge struck Bantha like a blow to the face. "Stop," he said, "Hold fire! Don't shoot that Fury!"

"Why the kark not?" hissed Lenar.

They got their answer when the incoming Fury unleashed a pair of proton torpedos that slammed into the nearest Sith

fighter. It exploded instantly, and Lowbacca's ship dropped behind the two remaining Furies to harass them with laserfire.

Bantha turned the comm to its widest transmission range. "Master Lowbacca, we're almost free! The second we jump, get out of here!"

He got long, triumphant Wookiee trill in response. Behind them the Furies broke formation, peeling in separate directions to deal with their attacks. The way ahead was clear.

Flying side-by-side with the *Bottom Line*, *Starlight Champion* settled on its proper heading. Bantha checked the hyperdrives, made sure they were ready to fire, and depressed the throttle. The old scout ship lurched into hyperspace, bringing salvation to all its passengers but leaving its owner and so much more behind.

The Sith pilots recovered well from their surprise. When they split formation Lowbacca, more concerned about the other ships' escape than anything, had hesitated to pursue either. Once *Starlight Champion* and the *Bottom Line* disappeared into hyperspace he set course for the closer Fury, which at that point had already pulled into a sharp turn aiming for Lowbacca's aft. He matched the turn but still failed to drop onto the Fury's tail until it leveled out into a steady course back toward Torn Station. The second Fury had maneuvered directly behind Lowbacca and began firing into his aft shields.

The Wookiee jerked and juked, trying to edge his way out toward the vector Nat and the others had left on. The Sith were dead set on preventing this, and as he tried to flee his pursuer the Fury he'd been chasing swung itself around to join the hunt.

Lowbacca growled and wrenched his fighter into mad twists and turns to avoid two sets of laserfire. They forced him further and further from the escape vector but also away from Torn Station. He could sense no more Jedi here in the Force, only a handful of Sith, many grim Imperials, and countless panicked bystanders.

His job was done. He'd allowed some Jedi to escape and saved lives, though not nearly as many as he'd wanted. The

hollow ache that had followed Arlen's death came back, and he thought of releasing his control stick, flying straight, and letting the Sith put an end to it.

The temptation passed again. He realized he was close to another escape vector, one that would take him back to Kashyyyk. To his son, his sister, his people, everyone who'd need help now more than ever. In a ship like this he might even be able to slip past the Imperials and land.

Despair was a vacuum and certainty filled it. Lowbacca twisted his way out from two more Sith laser volleys, pushed more power to his engines, and checked his nav computer. It took him a few extra seconds to work the unfamiliar controls, but he was able to pull up the proper coordinates and correct his heading.

The Furies were still on him, eager to kill their last Jedi. Lowbacca ceased his twists and turns long enough to set a straight course to Kashyyyk. The Sith marked their slippery target, locked on, and released two warheads each. The torpedoes shot through empty space and kept going. By the time they'd reached his position, lightspeed had kicked in. Lowbacca was home free.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

On first sight Khat Lah didn't even recognize the boy. Young humans could grow a lot in two years, and while Eli Horn was still a child, he was now a little less so than when Khat Lah had last seen him. He'd grown a little taller and lost some fat on his face. More, there was an unspoken confidence in the way he moved. After the death of his father, the death Khat Lah had failed to prevent, the Horn boy had justifiably acted lost and confused. It had been uncertain whether he'd continue his Jedi training at all. Yet three years later he was still on Ossus, and he looked like he belonged.

Khat Lah watched him from a distance at first. Teams of Jedi archivists had finished loading the Order's precious artifacts onto shuttles and the time had almost come to evacuate the apprentices. They'd all been gathered in the main training room on the academy's lowest level. Khat Lah watched from the entryway as the small Chandra-Fan Master Tili Qua ordered the children to split into groups. Older apprentices like Master Skywalker's son and his blue Twi'lek friend helped organize them.

Khat Lah watched Cade Skywalker with some interest. The blond-haired boy was clearly tense, as any reasonable being would be, but he knew was good at commanding attention and respect from the younger ones. Khat Lah suspected he'd grow into a natural leader like his father.

Mostly, though, Khat Lah watched Eli Horn. Compared to other children his size, Eli seemed calmer. He stood in rank and waited patiently for further instruction.

When Tili Qua stepped to one corner, engaged in conversation via comlink, Khat Lah saw his opportunity. He slipped along the side of the chamber until he was able to get close to Eli Horn. The boy watched him with placid expression as he approached.

Khat Lah squatted in front of the child and said, "Hello, Eli Horn."

"You're Khat Lah," the boy said pointedly. "You feel different."

"I know." The Yuuzhan Vong smiled lightly.

Eli's face twisted quizzically. "How can that be?"

"It is a long story. I hope to tell it to you, once we're away from here."

"You're coming with us?"

"Master Skywalker says I should make sure all the younglings escape. So I will."

"Everyone's nervous." Eli glanced around.

"Then be strong for them."

"I'm trying."

"You seem much stronger than before, Eli Horn. I'm glad of that. I know you came close to leaving the *Jeedai* entirely."

His face screwed at the bad memory. "That was a long time ago. But I *want* to be a Jedi. It's what Dad would have wanted."

"You honor his memory."

"Thanks." Eli blushed slightly. "I thought you'd left us."

"For a time I thought I had. But that was foolish. I know where I'm meant to be, and it is here." He extended a hand. "Now we stand together."

Eli stared at it, then clasped it by the wrist like a Yuuzhan Vong warrior. Khat gave the boy's forearm a squeeze, then released.

"Warrior Lah," a voice behind him said. "I didn't know you were here, but—"

Khat Lah looked behind him and saw Cade Skywalker freeze in surprise. He drew to full height, looked down on the blond boy, and asked, "Yes?"

“Um,” said Cade. He had a thousand questions in his eyes. The one he got out was, “You’re coming with us?”

“Your father has decided I should.”

“Okay. Great.” Cade paused. His mouth hinged open and he knew Skywalker was on the verge of asking *the* question.

Then a shrill cry drew attention from everyone in the room. Tili Qua raised his furry arms and gave another high-pitched shout to make sure all eyes were on him.

“Everyone, it is time to leave! I will lead the first group out not. Groups two through five, follow directly behind me. We must move quickly, children! Group one, follow me.”

The Chandra-Fan scuttled for the door and a herd of about twenty younglings fell in after him. The ordered column they’d stood in quickly turned to a jumble and they barely squeezed out the door and into the hall.

Something was wrong. Khat Lah skirted ahead, leaving Cade and Eli behind. He waded through the first herd of children until he was keeping pace with Tili Qua.

“Master *Jeedai*,” he said in a low voice, “We are hurrying. Something has happened.”

“I don’t want the children to panic,” Tili Qua said gravely. “We just have to move quickly. We *might* be able to get them out.”

“But what has happened?”

“We were too late,” the Jedi whispered. “They are here.”

Ossus was a verdant sphere of greens and browns blurred together, streaked with occasional whites. Darth Nihl knew that it had been a dusty desert world less than a decade ago and allowed himself admiration for the bio-engineering miracle the Yuuzhan Vong could work, but that miracle had betrayed the Jedi just like everything else.

When corrupting the Jedi’s terraforming project, Darth Maladi had intentionally avoided poisoning this world. By leaving Ossus as the only planet not despoiled they’d made it appear as though the Jedi had intentionally sabotaged all worlds save theirs in an act of sheer malice. It was almost too heavy-handed a gesture, but in their rush to blame someone the vermin of this galaxy had grabbed on the obvious target.

"It is appropriate this war end here," Nihl told the admiral at his side. "It began here, in more ways than one."

Yage nodded slightly. Nihl could feel the human's discomfort. He was a loyal Imperial, and not the kind who normally shirked to deal death to his enemies. However the prospect of attacking an undefended world didn't sit right with Yage, nor did the fact that he was going behind his emperor's back to do it.

Yage was no fool. He knew this one act would do more to reshape the Empire and the galaxy than everything in the past three years.

Vermin might have hesitated before taking the plunge, but Nihl did not. "Admiral," he said, "Begin deploying your fighters."

Yage nodded curtly and began issuing orders to *War Hammer's* crew. Nihl spotted the silver flecks of TIE Predators jetting out from beneath the ship, then moving into low orbit. Once they were deployed Yage turned to Nihl near the forward viewport and said, "They've made no attempt to escape yet. We've transmitted the signal saying we're here in the name of Emperor Fel to request a parlay."

Yage clearly wasn't comfortable with that either. Deception, to his rigid military mind, was dishonorable.

"And have they responded?" asked Nihl.

"They've raised shields and said they await further instructions." Yage licked his lower lip. "I'm not sure they're buying it."

"I didn't expect them to, after Coruscant." Nihl shrugged. "No matter. Admiral Yage, have your gunners target the area around their shield perimeter. Keep up sustained turbolaser volleys for the next five minutes. I want that to jungle *burn*."

"A bombardment will also keep them from evacuating." Yage looked down at the planet, as though he could spot the temple with his bare eyes. "When will you launch your strike team?"

"As soon as your bombardment ends. Have three squadrons of TIEs standing by to escort us, in case the Jedi had hidden defenses."

"They're already waiting."

Nihl gave the admiral a curt nod, then stepped off the bridge. On the way to Ossus, *War Hammer* had stopped to rendezvous with two assault shuttles packed with Sith. They more than tripled the number of warriors under Nihl's command and combined with *War Hammer's* stormtrooper complement it made a formidable invasion force. The Jedi would defend their home valiantly. Nihl had no doubt of that. On the way here, Yage had asked why *War Hammer* shouldn't just bomb the temple to rubble from orbit once shields were down. The Sith could clean up survivors afterward, he'd said. The vermin didn't understand, but vermin never did.

Some killing cried out to be done by hand. There was one specific Jedi that Darth Nihl needed to account for. They'd already battled twice inconclusively. There would be a third fight and nothing more.

With its shield generator activated, an umbrella of invisible energy protected everything one kilometer above and five kilometers around the Jedi temple. The Imperials declared their intentions with a full-scale orbital bombardment and Kol Skywalker watched from one of the balconies jutting out of the upper pyramid. From this height he could see green turbolaser volleys fall like heavy rain on the jungle beyond. The beautiful forest that Nei Rin had carefully sculpted in imitation of Zonama's vanished in flame.

A curtain of fire rose on all sides of the temple, climbing hundreds of feet into the air as it groped for oxygen to devour. The fire soon slipped beneath the shield barrier and continued to rage. The sky turned red like blood and the air went thick with ash. When Kol craned his head back he could see stray turbolaser blasts drop onto the dome itself and scatter emerald energy across its dome in sizzling waves. Every impact sounded like the sky cracking apart.

It felt like the end of the world, but Kol knew the worst was to come.

Standing to his right, Wolf Sazen had watched the inferno until he dared ask, "How do you think they'll attack?"

The answer came from Kol's right. K'Kruhk said, "They've burned away the forests. They'll land their ground troops on the burn zones, go under the shield perimeter, and attack."

"Can they move troops through that inferno?"

"They will try," said Kol. "And with the Sith, they'll probably succeed."

"They'll go for the shield generator first, then bring in air support," Sazen surmised. "We'll need to defend the generator at all costs."

"No." Kol raised his voice to be heard over thunderous pounding. "This is an evacuation under fire, not a siege. We'll thin their ranks in the jungle, but when the Imperials bring down the shield, we'll have as many ships possible ready to take off."

"Master Tili Qua just loaded the first group of padawans," Sazen said. "The youngest."

Kol knew Cade would be with the last group, with the oldest children. He prayed they could hold out that long.

"The evacuation shuttles for the younglings have all been updated with the hidden temple's location," said K'Kruhk. "If any of them should be captured, they've been rigged to self-destruct."

It was grim to think on: a shipful of children, blown to atoms by Jedi bombs. Yet they could not allow the Sith to learn the hidden temple's location. More, death would be mercy compared to Sith capture. Kol still shuddered to think of it happening to Cade.

"Master, go with the apprentices," he told K'Kruhk. "Wolf, you're with me. We'll defend as long as we can."

Grimly, the Zabrak nodded.

K'Kruhk turned inside, but Kol and Sazen remained to watch the continued bombardment. In truth, there was little they could do. Along with most of the able-bodied knights and masters, they would fight off whatever ground forces the Sith sent at them. Once the younglings escaped they would try to flee as well, but Kol doubted they'd get that far.

He found that he was ready to die, so long as he could get Cade safely away. The despair that had gripped him just

hours ago had vanished. If he dared look back on his life and actions he'd still find too many regrets, but they were irrelevant now. In this moment the only thing he could do was defend the temple and place himself in service to a living Force that, he knew now, contained miracles beyond what Jedi or Sith could know. That cleared all doubts and recriminations.

The bombardment lasted for another five or ten minutes, then suddenly stopped. Fires still raged on all sides, burning gradually toward the Temple, and hot wind swirled with a reek of brimstone. Kol stared above the inferno wall and spotted the moving light of blue ion engines dropping from the scarlet sky.

Sazen saw it too. "Here they come," he muttered and took out macrobinoculars.

The ships descended to the north of the Temple, closest to the shield generator. Sazen tracked their motion, then handed the binoculars to Kol. Through them he saw a trio of heavy Imperial landing craft and a small complement of TIE Predators and angular Sith Furies that peeled away and began flying circles over the shield dome, like scavenger birds waiting for prey to die. He bet those landing craft contained an entire stormtrooper regiment, plus walkers and heavy artillery. There were sure to be Sith among them too.

He watched the landing ships hover low over the fire wall and release grey fluid from their bottom holds. The flame retardant sent more black smoke into the air, obscuring the landers from view. Kol caught the light from their engines as they descended and nothing more.

"They're on the ground," Kol said. "It's time to move."

Sazen nodded and followed Kol inside. The Jedi took the lift down to the gathering room in the temple's base, where over a hundred knights and masters had gathered. They all knew the defensive strategy and there was no need for Kol to instruct them. Half the Jedi would stay in the Temple to help the evacuation. The other half, led by Kol, would go into the surrounding jungle and delay the Imperial advance.

The Imperials had done them a small favor by choosing to come from a single direction. The Jedi who left the temple

slipped into the dense jungle that shielded their movement from overhead observers, and as one they moved north. The burn zone edges closer but many Jedi, Kol included, had brought breathing masks to filter out the smoke that grew increasingly dense. Kol and Sazen stayed close together as they wove around trees and ducked beneath plants, moving steadily rather than quickly toward the red-gold light that flickered through densely-packed trunks. Even far from the fire the heat was intense, and Kol quickly sweat through his shirt. With the help of a battle meld sustained by several Jedi remaining at the temple, the ones in the jungle coordinated their advance toward the Imperials and were ready when the time came to fight.

The first mammoth walkers emerged from the firewall, crashing through trees and toppling burnt husks as their superheated metal hulls scorched bark and burned leaves. The towering AT-HTs stood shoulder-deep among the trees, and the green canopy brushed the chins of their head-like forward compartments. In a standard deployment the walkers' heads would swing back and forth, raining death on approaching infantry with chin-mounted heavy laser canons. These ones stared straight ahead the plowed forward on four legs. Each footfall sent tremors running through the earth.

The AT-HTs were troop carriers, battering rams, and deforesters all in one. There nothing the Jedi could do against their march, and Kol warned everyone in the Force-meld to stay clear of their devastation. After the first three heavy walkers passed, a half-dozen smaller, two-legged AT-SW walkers followed in their trail, stepping nimbly over toppled tree-trunks and splintered logs.

It was on the AT-SWs that the Jedi concentrated their first attacks. Kol, Sazen, and five other Jedi dashed out of the treeline and into the line of devastation carved by the AT-HTs. The closest AT-SW seemed to sense their approach as the Jedi attacked from the flank, and as its side-mounted turrets swung to fire, Sazen called on the Force to lift a toppled tree, ten meters long, and hurl it at the walker. Laserfire exploded the trunk, filling the air with burning pieces of jagged wood, but heavy chunks still knocked the

walker's side and tipped it off-balance. The AT-SW spread its legs wider to rebalance, allowing Kol to slip close to its right leg and cleave its ankle-joint with his lightsaber.

That was enough to topple the AT-SW. The walker stumbled, lost balance completely, and toppled on its side. Metal groaned and tore as it impacted, and the thrill of victory reverberated through the Jedi's meld. Far off, Kol felt another team strike a similar victory.

It lasted mere seconds. A laser turret on the downed AT-SW creaked into motion and aimed at the Jedi. Kol threw up a Force-barrier, too late. The ground around him exploded, throwing him into the air. He landed against a fallen log and struggled to his feet. As he did so he heard the burst of a concussion grenade and the downed walker ceased to fire.

He saw Sazen next. The Zabrak used the Force to push away the swirling smoke, revealing the exploded hull of the toppled AT-SW. It also revealed the charred remains of two Jedi who hadn't been as lucky as Kol and Sazen.

Panting, Kol swiped sweat from his forehead and looked toward the Temple. The three AT-HTs had carved a road of ash and broken trees straight through the forest, and he followed its path to see the giant walkers still lumbering on. Kol had hoped the attack on the AT-SWs might slow the larger walker's advance, but the AT-HTs had pushed onward.

He took out his macrobinoculars for a closer look. He'd charged another team of Jedi with laying concussion grenades like mines in the ground beneath the walkers. AT-HTs were heavily armored on their upper bodies, designed to withstand even direct impacts by fully-powered warheads, but the legs were relatively vulnerable. He had no idea whether the explosions would cripple them or slow them down, but it was the best the Jedi could do with equipment available.

Kol waved Sazen and the surviving Jedi to give chase. The walker-carved road was so strewn with wreckage that it was harder to pass through than the forest. Though the four-legged machines seemed to crawl slowly, they moved faster than a sprinting human, and though the Jedi drew on the Force for speed and endurance they were getting no closer.

Then a series of explosions sounded ahead. Kol and the others didn't stop running as fireballs blossomed around the AT-HTs' ankles. The great walkers slowed and Kol dared hope, but they soon began plodding at their steady, thunderous pace.

He felt disappointment from the other Jedi but tried to soothe them. They never had any hope of stopping those beasts, only delaying them. He felt another note join the meld, coming from the Jedi still in the temple. It said that the first two transports, packed with young apprentices and the most valuable Jedi artifacts, were packed and ready to run. Likewise two full squads of Twintails stood by in the main hangar, ready to run interference for the fleeing ships.

It was an encouragement, but it did little to soften the blow that came next. The AT-HTs finally unleashed the full power of their chin-mounted cannons, burning away treetops and pummeling the projection tower for the temple's shield generator. One volley was all it took. A pillar of fire shot upward and the invisible dome protecting them fell.

TIE Predators and a handful of Furies fell from the smoking red sky. The handful of turrets mounted on the temple's pyramid sprayed red laserfire but the TIEs nimbly avoided it. Kol watched as two dozen Twintails shot into the sky and began engaging the TIEs. His breath caught in his chest as two J-1 shuttles packed with younglings took off next, soaring straight through a hole the Jedi starfighters had carved for them. Some Predators broke to intercept the shuttles, but it only made them easy targets for the Twintails. Four fireballs tumbled into the jungle and the shuttles soared free.

They'd still have to get past *War Hammer* and its other fighters, Kol knew, but it was a start. Dozens of apprentices and the Order's most precious treasures were on their way to the hidden temple.

But not Cade, he thought. Not yet. Calling on the Force, Kol broke into a sprint. No other Jedi could match him.

Master K'Kruhk was doing his best to direct the evacuation of the Jedi Temple in the midst of its chaos. By his command,

the first two shuttles took to air the moment the energy shield collapsed. Both ships soared away clear, but that still left three more shuttles' worth of apprentices to go.

The other apprentices were huddled inside the Temple hallway leading out to a landing pad that jutted out from the waist between the complex's two pyramids. Khat Lah was with K'Kruhk at the head of the crowd, and through the open door he could peer through and see apocalypse outside. Jedi and Imperial fighters wove deadly ballets against a blood-red sky. Hot wind carried gusts of ash and a trio of colossal Imperial walking machines lumbered through the forest toward the temple, crushing a swathe through the trees with their four-legged march. Laserfire and explosions filled the sky in every direction, and some plasma bolts whipped perilously close to the extended landing pad.

K'Kruhk put a heavy hand on Khat Lah's shoulder. "It is time. The pilot is already with the shuttle. Take them out!"

Khat Lah looked at the group of children gathered behind him. Most were obviously terrified but Eli Horn, standing closest, looked brave enough to run.

While the last two groups of younglings huddled in the back of the corridor, Khat Lah called his forward. He charged out onto the umbilical catwalk and Eli Horn was right behind him, but other children balked at stepping outside. K'Kruhk gave a mighty roar that half-inspired, half-scared the apprentices and sent them rushing ahead.

Outside the air was hotter and it reeked of burning death. Strong wind blew, shoving some younglings into each other and jostling others against the catwalk's waist-high metal railing. Taking Eli by the hand, Khat Lah pulled him ahead as short as the boy's short legs allowed. Soon the landing platform was just steps away. The shuttle's hatch was open and a single Jedi stood on its maw, waving the group forward.

Then laserfire cut in from the side, ripping the shuttle apart. Flame and shrapnel flew through the air and the concussive shock knocked Khat Lah and his charge backwards. As he fell on his back the apprentices screamed in terror, but none seemed injured. Only the massive Whiphid stood firm, one hand outstretched with palm facing the ruined shuttle. Khat

Lah wondered if K'Kruhk hadn't called on the Force to protect them from the blast.

He looked to his left and saw the Imperial walkers had come within firing range. Their chin-mounted cannons vomited red plasma-bolts that slammed into the landing pad and destroyed another shuttle. Then the laserfire shifted, strafing toward the catwalk. Khat Lah shoved Eli flat on the metal and tried to pull other children down as well. Even K'Kruhk crouched his mighty body low. Scorching blasts soared over their heads, missing by a meter.

Then laserfire cut into the umbilical. Superheated metal twisted, screamed, and tore. The flat catwalk on which they lay twisted to a vertical angle. Though Khat Lah tried to grab them, two apprentices were thrown into the air and fell screaming. Flaming debris and the one remaining shuttle slid off the edge and plummeted down, where they exploded on the lower pyramid's ancient face.

Finally the platform itself, and all the beings clinging desperately to it, broke off from the temple's waist and fell. For Khat Lah it was a moment of mindless terror and he was certain he was about to die, crushed between old stone and ragged metal.

And yet, impossibly, the platform spun in midair, taking Khat Lah and all the apprentices with it. Its bottom side smashed into the pyramid slope and slid downward, throwing up a spray of sparks and chipped stone. The apprentices screamed. Khat Lah gripped the railing, closed his eyes, and waited for the fatal impact.

It didn't come. The blown-off piece of platform shot off the pyramid's side, hit the grass field around the temple, and skidded violently forward. Dirt flew in his face and caught in his mouth but he did not let go of the railing. The platform finally ground to a halt when its forward edge smashed into the treeline. Only after he heard the sound of metal crunching wood did Khat Lah open his eyes and roll off the body of Eli Horn, whom he had kept pinned to the platform during their entire fall.

Some apprentices cowered on the platform. Others struggled to their feet. A few whimpered in pain and seemed

too injured to stand. Khat Lah brushed Eli off, made sure the child was alright, and stood up. He saw now what had happened. The catwalk had been destroyed and the landing platform had fallen, but instead of smashing face-down it had corrected pitch and angle, and they had ridden their metal sled down the side of the pyramid and across the lawn, leaving a streak of plowed earth in their wake.

Khat Lah looked to K'Kruhk and understood the old Jedi Master had done all of it. The Whiphid was panting from exertion, his robe torn and his long gray fur in dirty tangles. He scanned the apprentices, then Khat Lah, and said, "We appear to have lost our ride."

Khat Lah wanted to tell him many things, mainly about how incredible his action had been, but there would be time for that later. Hopefully.

"We must try and move the injured," K'Kruhk grunted. "Then try and get back inside the Temple. There are still ships in the main hangar and the secondary landing platform. From there--"

He said, "Wait, Master *Jeedai*. There is another way. The ship I came here on, from Zonama. I left it in the forest. It is..." He looked at the Temple, tried to judge direction, then pointed south. "That way, I think. If it isn't damaged, it can fly."

K'Kruhk grunted through his tusks and looked at the sky. It was still red, and starfighters wove and dodged and exploded above them.

"That seems to be our best chance," the old Jedi said. "Lead the way."

With the fall of the shield generator, the attack on the Jedi Temple commenced in full. Along with Imperial fighters, shuttles dropped from the sky and began disgorging squadrons of stormtroopers. Some of them rappelled on their fiberchord cables and came down on top of the upper pyramid. Others were dropped onto the lawn and attempted to charge the mouth of the hangar on the bottom pyramid. The Jedi had set up artillery, tripod-mounted laser cannons that cut down the first wave of Imperial troops. Their defense

did not last long. A trio of Sith Furies came in from low over the forest and charged the hangar. After blasting away the tripod guns they pushed inside the hangar itself and strafed the Jedi shuttles preparing for launch. The Furies set down amidst the fire and smoke and began attacking the Jedi inside, and in minutes they were joined by their stormtroopers squadrons. The hangar was cleared within minutes, most of the ships inside smashed beyond repair. Their beachhead secure, the Sith and their minions charged deeper into the ancient Temple.

Jedi pilots still did their best to clear the skies. Against the TIE Predators they fought well even when outnumbered; against the Furies, it was a more even match. One Twintail took a laser barrage that sheared off both S-foils and came spiraling out of the sky. It nearly hit the forest, but its doomed pilot nudged the craft into one of the AT-HT walkers firing on the temple. The heavily armored, four-legged machine was designed to withstand the heaviest impacts, but the Twintail dove right into its head section. The explosion was amplified by the four proton torpedoes armed inside the Twintail, and the blast not only decapitated the walker but tipped it off-balance so its great bulk smashed into the walker beside it. The two mechanical giants crashed together into the woods, leaving the third and last one vulnerable to sustained volleys by the temple's defensive cannons and dive-bombing Twintails.

Kol Skywalker was outside the Temple when all that happened. Smoke was already bellowing from the hangar mouth when the survivors of the forest mission reached their destination. He could feel Jedi fighting and dying inside; the battle meld that had once brought solidarity spread havoc instead. Kol removed himself from it and concentrated on Cade. He could feel his son still inside the temple, still frantic and terrified.

When he, Sazen, and the other survivors emerged from the forest into the green around the temple, Kol saw that the landing platform on the east side the temple waist had been blown off. He'd only seen the first two shuttles escape skyward and had to assume the rest had been docked in place

when the platform was destroyed. But if Kol was alive it meant so were some of the apprentices, and he was relieved to see the second landing pad, jutting out from the west side, was still intact. It might not be for long. More and more Twintails were going down and Imperial fighters were dominating the skies.

The hangar was clearly under Sith control, but there were other ways inside the temple. When he was sure there were no AT-SW walkers stomping around the area, Kol led the survivors across the clearing and up the slanted stone pyramid. The lowest balcony was just three storeys up, and with lightabers and the Force it didn't take them long to ascend.

Getting inside the temple was the easy part. Even before they came upon their first Sith it was like stepping inside a raging storm. Violence and death were everywhere: old stone hallways, great gathering chambers, stairwells, meditation rooms. Scarlet-and-black Sith danced with their blood-red blades, battling against beleaguered Jedi. Squadrons of stormtroopers filled the corridors, unleashing blinding barrages of laserfire every time they turned a corner. It was clear the Sith had given the order to kill on sight. It no longer mattered if this was what the emperor had wanted. Kol understood that Roan Fel had been as much a pawn as him from the start.

Yet the old shame didn't burn him. It didn't bother him. Kol, Sazen, and the other Jedi he'd brought fought their way through the home that had become a slaughterhouse. After cutting their way through a full dozen stormtroopers they reached one of the stairwells that led up to the temple's waist. Kol could feel Cade there and bounded up the spiral. When Ossus had been attacked at the start of this war they'd had to destroy part of this stairwell. They'd repaired it since and the Imperials had used it to advance, as evidenced by the four blaster-scorched Jedi bodies they found. Kol didn't think he recognized them, but he didn't stop and look closely. They were hardly alone. Jedi were being killed, one after another. It was the greatest single slaughter since the end of the Clone Wars. He could *feel* it.

Yet it didn't break him. Kol bounded up the stairs, storey after corkscrewing storey, propelled by his faith in the Force and his love for his son. He knew on instinct when he'd reached the right door and barged through into the adjoining hallway. He was instantly greeted by the sound of laserfire, but none came at him. He raced down the hall, turned a corner, and found himself looking at the backs of a stormtrooper squadron as they fired at targets ahead. Kol spotted a few green and blue lightsabers deflecting laser bolts but only a few. Cade was back there and so were the remaining apprentices.

He felt Sazen and the other Jedi close behind him but didn't wait. Kol charged forward and cut down two stormtroopers from behind. Another spun at him, rifle raised, but Kol cleaved off the barrel. He felt another shot whip past his cheek, scarring it with heat, and looked to see Sazen knock the trooper to the ground. The stormtroopers had fully turned their attention away from the apprentices and in the ensuing fight two Jedi fell with smoking holes in their heads, but that was all they could do. Forty seconds after Kol's initial charge, the remaining Jedi stood over a hallway clogged with pieces of white-armored bodies. Everything reeked of scorched flesh and carnage and it left Kol dizzy on his feet.

Then he heard Cade call for him. His son sprinted down the hall and Kol just barely deactivated his lightsaber before the boy threw himself on it. Instead he took Cade into a firm embrace.

"Ah, kark it, dad," Cade whimpered. "I thought—"

"You thought I was dead? Now you know better." Kol mussed his hair and smiled. "And watch your language. I don't want it said I raised a foul-mouthed son."

"Yeah, sure." Cade sniffled back tears of joy. "What now?"

"Now we get to the second landing pad. There should be a few shuttles still parked there."

"What about the—"

"The main hangar's down," Sazen told him. "Sith are all over the temple. That's why we have to go."

Shado Vao came up behind Cade. "But if the hangar is destroyed, then the only ships we've got left are on the pad."

“Exactly.”

“That’s not enough for everyone. We can’t just...”

“We have to,” Kol said. “You apprentices are the future of the Jedi Order. The ones dying down there know that. We will sacrifice everything to get you to safety.” He watched sober knowledge settle on Cade, Shado, and the others. “That also means there’s no time to waste. So let’s get going.”

There was no easy way to get almost twenty terrified children through the jungle in the middle of a battle. Low-flying TIEs screamed overhead as Khat Lah led the way. He cradled an injured Zabrak girl in both arms while K’Kruhk carried two more, and a third child hung with arms around thick neck and broken legs dangling off the Whiphid’s back.

The extra weight slowed the adults down, but Khat Lah needed to pace himself and find his way through the forest. He had set the flier down in a small clearing. With its organic-green hull he didn’t think it would stand out as a target and he hadn’t heard any explosive strafing runs in that direction. However, as they got close to the landing zone he clearly heard the crash of falling trees and the distinct grind and creak of heavy machinery.

When Khat Lah spotted metal shapes moving in the forest ahead he stopped. To K’Kruhk he asked, “Are they searching for us?”

“Or perhaps for your flier,” the Whiphid growled. “How close is your ship?”

He pointed ahead. “There is a ridge there. Past it, there’s a clearing.”

“Then the walker’s in the way,” Eli moaned.

K’Kruhk bent low. “Please, children, get off me now.”

The other apprentices helped their comrades to the ground. K’Kruhk straightened and exhaled sharply. “Stay with the younglings, Khat Lah. I will be back shortly.”

Khat Lah could feel the Whiphid’s determination as he began moving for the forest. The Imperial walker up ahead seemed to have stopped in one place, though it hadn’t yet fired. It was one of those two-legged types, like a giant short-tailed *ni’yat* with three laser turrets on different sides of its

body. Khat Lah lost sight of K'Kruhk as the Jedi moved among the trees and slipped through dense foliage. He waited for the thrum and glow of an ignited lightsaber, but none came.

Instead he saw the walker pivot. It fired one of its laser turrets, sending a thunder-clap through the forest. Smoke rose and the children whimpered but Khat Lah knew, deep inside, that K'Kruhk was still alive, but frantic. He heard the buzz of a distant lightsaber and more firing laser cannons. A geyser of debris and smoke burst, hiding the walker and its prey from view.

Khat Lah knew K'Kruhk was in trouble. He put down the wounded apprentice he'd been carrying, told the children to stay, and hurried through the trees. The walker remained where it was as its head section pivoted, searching.

Suddenly a laser turret on its side swung toward Khat Lah. The Yuuzhan Vong jumped aside, evading the plasma bolt but not the force of impact. He went tumbling through the undergrowth until his shoulders slammed hard into the side of a tree. He heard the machine walking, trying to get a better firing angle. He picked his head up from the dirt, looked around, and finally saw K'Kruhk.

The Whiphid was a pile of brown fur and tattered robes sheltering behind another tree five meters away. Khat Lah saw the Jedi's hands were empty. He looked around in all directions until he finally found the metal gleam of K'Kruhk's lightsaber. It was half-buried in the dirt, closer to Khat Lah than the Jedi.

That was when the walker began firing again. Its lasers caught the base of the tree K'Kruhk was hiding behind, shattering it. The Jedi called on the Force to withstand the blast and tilted the tree forward, so its toppling trunk smashed down onto the walker's face.

That was not enough to bring the machine down. Its two great feet splayed and dug into the dirt. K'Kruhk strained with the Force, trying to press harder with the fallen tree even as the walker tried to shirk its weight.

Khat Lah ran for the lightsaber. He forgot about the turrets mounted on the sides of the walker's head, and red lasers

chased him as he dove into the dirt. One volley cut close above him. He reared up on his knees, knowing the next blasts could burn away his head and torso. He thumbed the lightsaber on, extending its luminous blade, and hurled it at the walker.

The lightsaber became a blazing pinwheel, spinning end-over-end. He'd thrown it blindly, but after it left his hand he knew what was needed. He saw the lightsaber keep flying, keep spinning, altering course and tilting angle just a little to become a diagonal disc of light. He wanted it and it happened, and the flying lightsaber cut through the walker's right leg and kept going.

The machine collapsed. K'Kruhk's tree fell on top of it and the body crumpled inward. Flame burst out through broken seams in its skin, followed by streams of smoke. Khat Lah rose to his feet and brushed dirt from his clothes. He watched as K'Kruhk called the lightsaber back to his claws. The old Whiphid looked at Khat Lah and nodded silent understanding. Together they walked back to the children.

The apprentices were silent with awe. K'Kruhk was clearly tired from his exertion, but without complaint he bent low and took the three injured padawans onto himself. Khat Lah picked up the third and they went ahead.

The group rounded the smoking ruin of the walker and moved carefully downhill. Through breaks in the treeline Khat Lah could make out the smooth green surface of his flyer. When they got down to it, he lowered the ramp and began moving the children inside. This was not a large vessel, and though its dovin basal propulsion meant that its interior wasn't clogged up by a bulky engine, the children were nonetheless tightly-packed inside.

Once they got the apprentices as settled as could be, Khat Lah went into the cockpit. There was just a single seat and he dropped into it, then placed the cognition hood on his face. He was instantly bound to the living ship's mind, like the Force-connection he sometimes felt but far stronger. He was aware that the ship's dovin basals were ready to push off on his command, and that they'd naturally open up to swallow any warheads of lasers cast their way. That was good, but

Khat Lah would have been more confident with weapons aboard.

There was nothing to be done with it. He commanded the ship to rise straight in the red sky. It shot up and kept going straight, high above the Temple that smoked from its assault, higher still past the burning jungle and its thick smoke. Some of the TIE Predators and Sith fighters spun to follow them but the Sekotan ship was faster. Khat Lah pointed its nose skyward and the wide-winged flyer soared higher into the atmosphere. Its pilot didn't even have to direct it to evade fire. The living ship naturally sensed and slipped around Imperial lasers, and when one proton torpedo got close enough to burst, a dovin basal swallowed it with a singularity.

When they exited the atmospheric envelope, Khat Lah was aware that one large star destroyer sat above the planet. It was too far away to hit them directly but it was launching fighters. They tried to set on an intercept course but underestimated the speed of the Sekotan flyer and found themselves chasing its wake.

Soon it was all behind them: the Imperial pursuers, the verdant world, the broken temple and still too many Jedi battling to stay alive. It ached Khat Lah to leave them behind, but he knew he'd done what he could. Without regret he commanded the ship to jump to darkspace, and instantly they were gone.

The enemy tide was so great there was no stopping it. Kol could feel it surging after them as he directed the herd of frantic younglings toward the west landing pad. When they finally got there he was relieved to find it was intact, with a single green J-1 shuttle in the center. The adult Jedi waved the apprentices ahead, and Cade and Shado helped drag some of the scared younger ones across the narrow umbilical to the platform. They were still coming across when a handful of stormtroopers burst through the doorway, firing madly. The two Jedi in front of Kol and Sazen were taken by surprise and cut down. Kol got his lightsaber up too slow and took a burning, glancing shot across his collar.

"Master?" Sazen called as cut down the nearest trooper.

Kol grunted, fought down the pain, and joined the Zabrak. They cut two troopers and used the Force to hurl two more over the railing and off the catwalk.

Kol could feel his son lingering, watching his father when he should have been getting the younglings on the ship and prepping for takeoff. So could Sazen. The Zabrak called, "Cade! You and Shado get the younglings on the shuttle *now* and get off-planet! Your father and I will make a stand here. Hurry!"

Kol cut down the last stormtroopers close to him. There were no Sith warriors in sight, nor white-armored soldiers, but he could feel the dark side's hungry presence. They'd be here in minutes. Kol backed away until his shoulders knocked with Sazen's.

"They're coming, Kol."

"I sense them too, Wolf. We hold them here," Kol said firmly. "There's no escape from the landing pad except with the shuttle, and now way to the shuttle but through us."

The next wave of stormtroopers came through the door and lit up the space before the landing platform with laserfire. Kol and Sazen immediately began deflecting their attacks with a flurry of lightsaber movements, but with so many blasts coming at them Kol knew it was only a matter of time before some slipped through their defenses and cut the Jedi down.

Then a lanky form, wielding a blue-bladed saber, tumbled through the air over Kol and Sazen's heads, and landed in the midst of the stormtroopers. Cade furiously hacked at the soldiers, cleaving off a leg and an arm before Sazen used the Force to pull him out of the fray. Cade immediately set down on his feet and turned back to fighting.

"Why are you still here, Padawan?" Sazen barked. "I gave you instructions!"

"Shado doesn't need me to fly the shuttle, Master! You and dad are going to need me more!" Cade barked as he cleaved off another trooper's arm. Kol could feel the desperation flooding through his son, and the anger.

As he resumed deflecting more attacks from the stormtroopers, Kol called, "Cade, we're not going to start this

again. You're still a padawan, not a knight. You owe your master obedience. He gave you an order."

"My place is here with you and Master Sazen," Cade insisted as he cut down another trooper. "*I feel* it."

Kol pulled his blade from the chest of the last trooper. They'd built a rampart of the dead but the attacks seemed to have finally abated. That wasn't the end of it; Kol could feel a dark presence approaching, powerful and hungry like stormtroopers never were. The Sith were coming in full force. He tried to sense other Jedi still battling in lower sections of the temple, but could find none.

Over the sound of his hard breath Kol heard the rising hum of the shuttle engines and told his son, "Listen to the Force, Cade. A Jedi's first concern is to preserve life. Protect the younglings with your life, son. Obey Master Sazen and *go*!"

Sullenly, reluctantly, Cade said, "Yes, father."

He turned and sprinted for the shuttle. Kol spared a tiny glance at his son's retreating back- the last of him he'd ever see- then turned his attention forward. The dark malice of the Sith was growing even closer.

"Not the best of farewells, Kol," Sazen said softly as he took his place beside Kol.

"We take what is given. Speaking of which.... Here they come."

They stepped out of a veil of smoke, down the catwalk connecting the landing pad to the temple. An unseen hand lifted the piled bodies of dead stormtroopers and casually dumped them over the railing. Seven Sith warriors, their bodies marked by vicious patterned tattoos, marched imperiously toward the two battered Jedi. Most of their bodies were patterned in reds and blacks, but the one in the lead was a tall thin humanoid with long black hair and a chalky white face. It could only be Darth Nihl.

"These are the last," the Nagai said. "Finish them and our master's will is accomplished."

"What?" Kol called, "No demand for us to surrender, Sith?"

"My master will not make Palpatine's mistake," Nihl said. "All Jedi must die."

He charged. Kol and Sazen were there to meet him but Nihl was fast. He ducked beneath Kol's blow and snapped a sidekick that took the Jedi in the stomach. He staggered back. Thighs hit the catwalk railing and he struggled to keep balance.

At the same time Nihl fought back a series of blows from Sazen, then spun his long-bodied lightsaber around and jabbed its butt into Sazen's sternum, cracking bone. That stunned the Zabrak long enough for Nihl to spin his blade back around and cut off Sazen's arm at the elbow.

Before Nihl could land the killing blow Kol struck out in a long horizontal slash. The Sith bent backward to evade it. Kol called Sazen's lightsaber to his hand and stood between the Sith and his friend, the Sith and his son.

"I am Kol Skywalker, servant of the living Force! None of you will pass!"

The other Sith finally joined in. On the narrow catwalk only two of them could attack Kol at a time, but even with two blades it was a struggle to hold them back. He tried to hold the center but they kept striking at his flanks. Soon three Sith crowded the catwalk in front of him and he had no hope of stopping them.

Then a blond-haired blur rolled in from behind, beneath Kol's right saber. Cade popped to his feet and took the enemy in front of him by surprise. An upward thrust caught the Sith in the gut and Kol gave his wavering body a nudge in the Force to knock it into the one beside him.

"I'm here, father! You don't fight alone!" Cade's grin was white, proud, angry.

"No!" Kol shouted. "Every moment you delay here you endanger the lives on board that shuttle. This is *not* how you were taught!"

"I won't leave you!"

As the Sith pulled their wounded back and regrouped for another attack, Kol told his son, "You're putting your own wants- your own desires- ahead of your duties, ahead of the needs of others!"

Another Sith came at him. Kol batted back the attack and looked over his shoulder. Cade was on his knees beside

Sazen's broken form. "You're a *Skywalker*, Cade! Act like one! Help your master onto the shuttle and leave!"

Cade's desperation settled into beaten determination. He bent low, pulled Sazen onto his back, and called on the Force to give him the strength to rise.

His son growled, "As you command... Master." And then Cade was gone.

Kol felt his son retreat. He turned his attention to the Sith in front of him. They came two at a time, three at a time. He used both lightsabers against them, defending with one hand and attacking with the other. He pushed Sazen's blade into the stomach of one Sith, then used his own to cleave the arm off another. A glancing blow cut across his forearm but he ignored the pain. Another stabbed him in the thigh, tearing muscle. Kol should have dropped to his knees for the pain but he ignored the wound, pirouetted on his good leg, and struck the head off his attacker.

Suddenly Darth Nihl was before him. The Sith attacked more savagely than the others. Kol could feel his anger in the Force, and with it a raw lust for violence. Nihl was giving all of himself to the Force's dark side, forgetting every other desire beside his urge to kill Kol Skywalker. It was almost flattering. He countered Nihl's angry lust with deepest calm. He blocked attack after attack, and when Nihl tried to whip the butt of his long-bodied saber in Kol's face the Jedi bent backwards, lowered his blade, and swiped at Nihl's hips.

The Sith evaded, then went for Kol's knees. Kol jumped high, held himself in mid-air for a split-second, then came down on top of Nihl's overextended back. One boot slammed into Nihl's shoulder, the other his head, and Kol slammed him into the metal catwalk hard enough to crack bone.

There was no time for victory. More Sith were coming. Kol leaped back from their leader's body to continue the fight.

He found himself in a state of perfect clarity once more. He knew every attack before it came. He danced perfectly to the music of the Force, defending, counterattacking, dodging and lunging even as his body cried out in agony. After a lifetime of striving and failing to bring about his vision there was joy

in simple surrender. Unencumbered by any desire, even for life, Kol held back the tide of Sith, slaying one after another.

He remembered Jaina Solo on her deathbed, empty of regret, full of pride at having expended the last bits of her life energy to save Kol. She'd told him Skywalkers gave everything for Skywalkers. It was too true. He thought on the grandfather he'd never known and the father he could barely remember, and he wondered if this is how they'd felt in their final moments.

Kol heard the roar of firing engines and knew it was almost done. More Sith were coming down the walkway, climbing over the bodies of their dead.

He felt light, in his body and his mind, as he called, "Back! Only death lies this way!"

Beside him, from among the piled bodies, Kol heard a hissing voice: "Yes... *Death!*"

Darth Nihl's rage returned from nowhere. It took raw form, sizzling energy that was suddenly all over Kol, consuming him, tearing deep into his flesh from the holes already cut. His body spasmed and both lightsabers fell from his palms. Agony banished the dance and the Force itself and Kol collapsed hard on the deck. His mouth hinged open but he couldn't even scream. His very lungs were burning.

Vision blurred and darkened but he saw a black and white form looming over him, red-gold eyes blazing in the middle of its face. The Force came back to him but it carried only Darth Nihl's vicious triumph.

Lightning came again. More mindless agony. The Sith Lord's hate rendered his very cells, killing his every part of his body at once. Kol tried to struggle through the pain and find the Force, the light side that offered knowledge and peace and purpose, but it was nowhere. Agony was all.

The world grew darker yet. All color drained from Nihl's form and he became only black against the blood-red sky. There was pain in everything.

And then a new form drifted into view. It was blurred but its small dark shape moved steadily across the red sky. Kol caught the flare of engines and dimly heard them fire to full. And for one short moment, as everything else slipped away,

he felt Cade in the Force, aboard that roaring shuttle and peering down in grief and anger at his father's body.

Kol tried to touch Cade back tell him it was alright, that Skywalkers gave everything for Skywalkers, and that if he clung to his dark feelings it would poison him for the rest of his life. He wasn't sure if it got through. By the time the shuttle soared away Kol Skywalker heard nothing, saw nothing, and felt nothing.

Chapter Thirty

When Eshkar Niin realized he was alive, he couldn't believe it. His last memories were vivid: the fight atop the landing platform, the pain of Draco's saber piercing his chest, the raw anger that consumed him in a blaze when he fell off the edge. He remembered killing Elliah too, and the rush of liberation that had come with it. He just didn't understand how he'd survived.

He was weightless in his bacta tank, cut off from the world around him and even the passage of time. The only face he saw through the liquid haze was that of a tentacle-faced Quarren, patterned in blurred lines of red and black. It took him longer to recall the name attached to it, but eventually he did.

When the medical droid finally removed Niin from the tank, Darth Maleval was there to greet him. Niin wrapped himself in a towel, taking care with the still-tender area around his chest. He felt naked beneath Maleval's smoldering, silent gaze.

When the Sith did not speak, Niin asked, "How am I still alive?"

"We have agents in Bastion," Maleval said. "They observed your battle on the landing pad. When you fell, they recovered you. Best we can tell, the Imperial Knights think Eshkar Niin is dead."

"I see."

"They are not wrong."

Niin stared at Maleval. The Sith stared back. He remembered the conversation they'd had on Berchest. The Sith had told him that in order to truly embrace the power of the dark side he had to destroy the man he once was. Once that was accomplished he could take a new name and become a new being. Niin had never expected that death and rebirth to feel so literal.

He also remembered what else Maleval had said. In order to kill his old self, he needed to kill what he loved most. He thought back on Elliah. He recalled the years they'd known each other, the budding friendship at the academy, and the love he'd had to suppress because she already the Emperor's. He'd excused it then, telling himself that they'd both made vows to Roan Fel and in their own ways they had to keep it. Now that seemed like the delusion of a man justifying his own weakness. He should have taken Elliah for himself, but he'd allowed her to go to Fel instead. That was what had killed her.

Niin tried to hold that knowledge close. Thinking of Elliah still brought small pangs of regret, not for her murder, but for allowing things to have come to that point. He hoped, in time, even that guilt would fade.

"I am no longer Eshkar Niin," he said eventually.

"In killing the empress you have demonstrated your devotion to the Sith path," Maleval agreed.

"I am a Sith, then? Am I a Lord?" He wanted desperately to be one. It was the only course available to him now and he wanted to advance as far as he could. By embracing the darkness in himself he'd already broken chains he hadn't known existed. He could only imagine what the future would bring.

"I have spoken with Lord Krayt about you," Maleval said. "He has agreed. By his word, you are now a Lord of the Sith."

He felt joy tingle through his body. "Then do I have a name?"

"Traditionally, we chose our own names."

Yes, of course they would. To be a Sith was to command your own destiny. Niin had no idea all of what went into a

Sith's name, but he thought on what had brought him here and what he had done. The revelation of the Sith had dropped him into great confusion, and for newly two years he'd felt a being torn in half. From the agony of that conflict he'd finally made himself anew into something stronger and better than Eshkar Niin.

He saw now that conflict was the only crucible that could have forged his new self, and that it was to be embraced rather than feared.

He took a deep breath and said, "I am Darth Havok."

"Good," purred Maleval. The other Sith laid a red hand on his shoulder, touching him for the first time. "Get dressed, Darth Havok, and then I will explain all that's happened since your injury. You've awoken just in time to see history made."

Years of experience as a spy, combined with the mental compartmentalization required to live dual lives, were the only things keeping Nyna Calixte composed. Her highest virtue was self-control, over her own mind as much as her external situation. On the outside, things had gone badly beyond her reckoning. Inside, at the core of her self, practiced mental discipline was the only thing keeping her anger and grief from boiling to the surface.

Failure could be fatal, given the company she kept.

It was three days after the fall of Ossus, and from the viewport of Veed's cabin aboard his *Imperious* she could see the luminous artificial swirls of Coruscant's cityscape. Traffic at the capital world continued to pulse in and out like lifeblood, but a dozen Imperial star destroyers now sat ominously in loose formation around it. Roan Fel was set to arrive within hours for his formal coronation as emperor of the known galaxy. A grand occasion if things went as planned, but one way or another, they weren't going to.

Veed was talking, but not to her. "The attack on Ossus was a mistake, Lady Maladi," he told the Sith. "We should have waited until they had *all* gone there. Casualty reports suggest that more than half of them might still be alive and other there somewhere in the galaxy!"

"I disagree, Veed." The Devaronian woman looked faintly bored with the conversation. "Gathered together they would have been more difficult to defeat. They are scattered, without leadership, without a base. We will hunt them. They will find no refuge."

Calixte found she didn't care what happened to the scattered Jedi. She'd never had any love for the Order, only for Kol Skywalker. The Sith had, quite triumphantly, proclaimed Kol dead at Ossus. They said Darth Nihl had killed him along with hundreds of other Jedi, and Calixte had no reason to doubt it. There was no mention of Cade, but the worst had to be assumed.

Kol and Cade were both dead, and Calixte had been powerless to prevent it. The strike at Ossus had taken her by surprise, but she should have foreseen it. Everything the Sith did involved treachery. She should have warned Kol, and then-

Her thoughts faltered. Knowing Kol, he'd have chosen to make a brave, self-sacrificing stand regardless. But if he'd been warned, perhaps Cade would still be alive.

Self-control, she reminded herself. It was essential, especially in front of Maladi. She banished regret and grief, shoved them deep down into the bottom of her heart where they'd rot and fester inside of her, but at least they'd be far from the surface. Maybe, in time, she could lock them away, separate from Nyna Calixte as the rest of Morrigan Corde's life.

She drew in breath and said, "The real problem at the moment, Lady Maladi, is going to be the emperor. The mission to Ossus was supposed to have been a diplomatic one, to convince the Jedi to join the Empire. Fel gave direct orders that the Jedi were not to be attacked." She steadied herself and looked away from the window, at the Sith Lord. "Fel won't stand for open rebellion. He's called for a meeting with the Moff Council, none of whom were consulted before the Ossus attack, either. I can't see that ending well, can you?"

"I believe we were all in agreement that Roan Fel would eventually have to be replaced," Maladi said. "His support

for the war was always tepid, at best. He has kept his Imperial Knights from participating, and has never embraced we Sith as allies. My master, Darth Krayt, believes it is time *another* sat on the throne. Wouldn't you agree, my friend?"

"Absolutely, my lady!" Veed saw his opening and jumped for it. To Calixte it seemed like a goober fish biting the bait.

"My master will attend this meeting. It would be best if no one else, including the moffs, knew beforehand. Feign surprise when we arrive." Maladi turned toward the exit. "I'm tell my master we are agreed. Things must be prepared. My fellow Sith need to be in position, be ready."

"Yes!" Veed said to her back as the door slid shut. With the Sith gone he immediately spun on Calixte. "At last, Nyna! The throne is going to be mine! *Ours*, just like we planned!"

"You should have discussed the Sith attack on Ossus with me *before* it took place." She struggled to keep the anger from her voice.

"There wasn't time. The Sith showed up with instructions from Krayt. I had to make Yage think it was my idea or look like an idiot." He sounded surprised she was bringing this up.

"I'm your partner, Morlish. I do not hear about things like this *after* the fact!"

His smile grew insufferably confident. "You *are* my partner, Nyna, and a formidable one. I'm lucky *you* never wanted the throne for yourself."

She breathed out, turned away. She should let him think flattery placated her. "It's too exposed. I've always felt the real power was *behind* the throne. You know that." Her eyes narrowed. "It's the Sith that bother me."

Veed chuckled. "A little late for *that*, darling."

She shook her head as he moved for the pitchers on the table. "Morlish, did Maladi actually *say* they were going to put you on the throne in place of Fel?"

"Who else is there? None of the other moffs are qualified." He poured a tall glass of champaign, bronze and bubbly, then another. "Besides, Maladi must know that you and I would never accept someone else on the throne. We'd depose

them.” She took the glass and let Veed tap it. “The fact is, darling, the Sith *need* us.”

“Thus far.” She wasn’t going to trust her fate to the Sith, even if Veed did. Still, she forced a smile and tipped up her glass.

“This is our moment of triumph, Nyna. Don’t let it scare you.” He returned the toast. “To us!”

“To us,” she echoed, less enthusiastic. She watched him drink, a long savory gulp, before taking a sip herself.

Deep inside, her mind still worked. Roan Fel and his Imperial Knights were set to arrive in a few standard hours aboard his personal warship, the old but venerable *Jagged Fel*. From there he’d meet with the Alliance triumvirs, then some military representatives. Some hours were allotted for Fel to move people and equipment into the Alliance government headquarters complex. Then, finally, he’d have his meeting with the moffs.

She decided there was enough time to play Fel a quiet visit. He’d hated the sight of her, but if he hadn’t killed her already he wouldn’t now. When she told him what the Sith had planned he might even thank her, though she wasn’t expecting it.

Roan Fel’s arrival on Coruscant was the kind of triumph he could never have imagined at the start of this war. It felt worse than any defeat.

When his shuttle descended from the *Jagged Fel* to the landing field in Galactic City, over two thousand stormtroopers stood in martial rows to greet him. Their white armor shone in the morning sun and as he stepped down the ramp Roan squinted into the gleam. At the head of the formation, proudly saluting their emperor, was a cluster of moffs and admirals. There was Yage, who they were now feting as the Hero of Ossus, doing his best to look proud, though Roan could sense stifled shame. There were Veed and Geist, looking insufferably smug. There was Calixte, who gave away nothing on her face or in the Force. For her to have hidden her thoughts all this time, the Sith must have coached her well.

A group of Alliance officials were behind them, including all three triumvirs and Admiral Petan. They greeted their new emperor formally, respectfully, and tried to do it with dignity, but Roan could tell they were breaking inside.

They all welcomed Roan and they all welcomed his heir with the same respect. Young Marasiah was draped in the finest violet splendor, and on Roan's insistence she'd added a streak of white through her dark brown hair just as her father had. Jagged and Davek Fel had earned their white through wartime scars. It has been Roan's mother who'd suggested he add an artificial streak to his own in respect to his predecessors, and Marasiah would continue that tradition.

The princess had never looked more regal and never looked more tragic. She held herself with stone-faced dignity but Roan could feel her ache in the Force. It had been constant since Elliah's death and Roan knew there was only so much he could do. The loss of his father as a teenager had left him with scars that never healed. It had been, ironically, sadly, Elliah who'd done the most to mend them.

Aside from Marasiah he'd brought a complement of Imperial Knights. Hogrum Chalk stayed close to Marasiah and Roan had charged him with protecting her at all costs. Hogrum had always doted on his niece and needed to order to watch her.

Roan had also brought along his cousin Mohrgan and Antares Draco. The younger man still bore the fresh red scar from Eshkar Niin's blade and had refused to have it removed. Roan was sure he'd carry that mark for the rest of his life, and in a sick way savor it's hurt every time he looked in the mirror.

Bringing Draco and his cousin to Coruscant had been a very deliberate choice. Both men were clearly stricken with grief and guilt for having failed to save the empress. By having them at his side, Roan was showing them that they still had his trust. Draco in particular had his gratitude for killing the traitor Niin.

Elliah's murderer was beyond Roan's vengeance, but it had not just been Niin who'd slain his wife. The Sith as a whole would pay for that, and a great many other things.

After that he was swept inside to attend to matters of state. As he listened to bragging moffs and plaintive triumvirs it was hard to care. He'd had almost a week to mentally grapple with Elliah's death. Grief had become a cold ache inside instead of hot pain, and he found his mind drawn increasingly to the uncertain future.

A reckoning with the Sith would come soon. That was the most important thing. To come at them as soon as the war ended was too obvious, and he was sure the Sith would be prepared. Instead he wanted to take care of Veed and Calixte first. Once he stripped the Sith of their allies on the Moff Council he'd be able to move against them more openly, without fear those traitors would feed his every intention to Darth Krayt.

Still, he was prepared for the worst. He'd ordered most of his Imperial Knights to gather at the academy on Bastion. Treis Sinde was there and so was his mother. Together they could marshal his Knights for any defense. With Veed gone he doubted the Sith would be so bold as to attempt a repeat of Ossus, but if they were, he'd assigned Admiral Fenel's fleet to stand guard over the Imperial capital. The man was a vicious fighter and unlike Yage he'd never been less than loyal to his emperor.

After all the meetings and ceremony Roan and his party retreated to their new quarters. An entire wing of the government district's most elaborate hotel had been given over to them, with the promise of permanent living space to come. As his Knights and security officers scoured the chambers for listening devices, Roan drew his daughter aside to a room they knew was clear.

"Thank you for coming," he told her. "I know it wasn't easy to sit through the talk and meetings."

The girl stared out the window with glassy eyes, toward Coruscant's endless towers and traffic lines but not at them. "I was going my duty, Father."

It was a rote answer, and sounded especially dull on her lips. It was hard to get anything more out of her after her mother's death. Roan knew he hadn't been the warmest father. He'd always striven to install duty and discipline, in

public and private. Marasiah would need it for the burdens she'd one day shoulder. The Fel monarchy only deserved to stand if it produced strong and righteous leaders. Roan had done everything to ensure his daughter would be one.

Still, it left him at a loss in moments like this, which should have been tender. Striving to be a good emperor had not always made him a good man. He'd known that for a long time. Now he wasn't certain if he'd made a good emperor either.

He put a hand on her shoulder and said gently, "I'm sure this is all trying for you. Once a bedroom is secure you can get some rest."

"Yes, Father."

Roan didn't expect any more than that. He left her and told Hogrum to make sure she had a chance to sleep. His brother-in-law took the order with a dull now. Since Elliah's death he, too, had become distant.

Once the entire collections of rooms reported clear, they moved Marasiah into her new quarters. While Hogrum tended to her, Roan sent away the other Imperial Knights except for Draco and Mohrgan.

"Later this afternoon I'll be holding a convocation of the Moff Council," he told them. "We'll make our move then."

Mohrgan already knew of Roan's plan to arrest Veed on charges of treason. "Who do you plan to make supreme commander in his place? Not Yage?"

"No. Not Yage. For now the position will remain vacant. I may choose Admiral Fenel, or perhaps Admiral Challon. Them I trust."

"And Calixte?"

She was more the architect of this than Veed, and his heart smoldered when he thought of her smug smile during their last conversation. "Not yet. We'll monitor her closely. I want to see how she reacts to losing Veed. It may flush out more enemies we're unaware of."

"And Yage? He *was* Calixte's husband."

"You mean is he a co-conspirator? I don't think so. He's not pleased with her taking Veed as a lover. I can feel that in

the Force. I think Yage was backed into Ossus by Veed and Darth Nihl.”

“Still,” Draco spoke up, “You shouldn’t trust him.”

“I trust only my Knights. That’s why I’m bringing all of you this afternoon. With you at my side we can start removing the parasites that have been sucking away our lifeblood.”

He said it to give them badly-needed confidence, but Mohrgan sighed and shook his head. “It’s a risky move you plan at this meeting, cousin.”

“Less than you might think, Mohrgan,” Fel said. “The hardliners like Moff Geist might chafe under the ‘victory without war’ program, and they may hold no sympathy for the Jedi, but they will not tolerate outright disobedience to a direct order. After all, it violates their sense of tradition.” He looked over Draco, then Mohrgan. “We cannot divest ourselves of the Sith yet, but we can be rid of Veed. If he makes any suspicious moves, kill him. And watch Moff Calixte very closely.”

Mohrgan nodded, but Draco’s eyes darted to the side. Roan felt him reach out with the Force, felt him find something just meters away.

Draco spun toward the window and pulled back the half-drawn curtain. He ignited his white lightsaber and pointed its tip directly at Nyna Calixte’s neck.

The woman simply raised her hands and put on that damnable smile. “Hmm,” she said, “I feel somewhat... Unwelcome.”

Mohrgan raised one hand in the air and with the Force lifted her off her feet. “Wait,” she began, and then Mohrgan threw her hard against the wall. That took the wind out of her and finally removed the smile. She remained pinned there, feet dangling in the air, as the two Knights brought their white sabers close to her neck.

“I didn’t kill you last time, Calixte,” Fel said. “That may have been a mistake on my part.”

“Killing me now would be a greater one,” She insisted. She’d quickly stifled shock and replaced it with that damnable calm.

"She may have learned our plans, My Lord," Mohrgan said.

"You mean your plans to arrest Morlish Veed? I knew of those *before* I came. I also know that the Sith are planning to kill the Emperor."

"Don't trust her, Master," Draco said, "She's lying to save her life!"

"I *don't* trust her, but she could have better protected her life by not coming at all." Fel considered. The woman was venal and treacherous, but never a fool. "Explain yourself, Calixte."

He gave Mohrgan a gesture, and the Knight let Calixte drop. She fell hard but remained upright, like a nimble manka cat. "Thank you," she breathed, "The Sith plan to attend the Moff Council meeting and assassinate Your Majesty. I don't know how many are coming. Your only hope is escape."

"Forgive my suspicion, but why would you want to save me?" asked Fel. He hadn't expected the Sith to be so bold. "I assume Veed will be named Emperor in my place. The last thing you would want in that case is the *true* emperor loose in the galaxy. It might split the Empire unless... Ah!"

Then it hit him. As always, she was too clever by far.

"I believe they're going to put Krayt on the throne," Calixte said. "Veed, and you by extension, would then become a liability. But so long as I'm loose, allegiances are split. Krayt will need you. *Both* of you."

"Your survival is in both our interests," she agreed, "And that is enough to make us allies."

Fel's mind worked quickly. He spun on Mohrgan. "They'll expect me, and a contingent of Imperial Knights, to appear at the Council..."

"I'll lead them- and your double," Mohrgan nodded firmly. They're brought the cosmetically-altered actor along just in case. "I've *wanted* to test myself against the Sith! They'll have lost the element of surprise. We'll fight our way free and join you!"

Mohrgan was eager, too eager. Guilt over Elliah's death had marked him as clearly as the scar on Draco's face. The man was determined to stand once more against the Sith, even if it killed him.

Roan knew his cousin was right, and a distraction was needed. He also knew that refusing this request would break something inside Mohrgan. He'd brought the man along as a show of trust; now he had to follow through. Roan put a hand on Mohrgan's shoulder, squeezing hard. "Good. That would be good. Just... do not *underestimate* them, cousin."

Mohrgan nodded. He needed no reminder of the damage a Sith could do.

Calixte starting confidently for the door. "There is a ship waiting on sublevel twelve. Take the maintenance tunnels from the senate chamber." She was a woman who thought of everything, except the wisdom of picking Sith for allies.

"You know that if the Sith even suspect your complicity, you'll die," Draco warned.

"If this fails, I'm dead anyway. I've had *some* success in shielding my thoughts from Force-users." She gave a little smile, a parting barb. "You, for example. Farewell, Your Imperial Majesty. Safe voyage."

And just like that, she walked out of the room. Draco spun on his emperor. "Can we really trust her?"

"It appears we don't have a choice." Roan frowned. "The princess must be moved off-world quickly and quietly. I'll have Hogrum move her to the *Jagged Fel*."

"What about the others?"

He'd brought an entourage of almost fifty people, and if he tried to move them out of harm's way the Sith would know. Likely all their lives were forfeit, but as servants to their emperor they were prepared to die.

"No one else will be moved," he said with finality. "We'll risk nothing in tipping off the Sith."

"We understand," said Mohrgan. "Majesty, we don't have much time. I'll gather the other Knights and inform them. I'll make sure they're ready."

Roan turned to his cousin and clasped him by the shoulders once more. To lose Mohrgan so soon after losing Elliah was like a fresh knife-wound but the alternative was losing his life and surrendering the galaxy to the Sith.

"Fight well, cousin," he said.

Mohrgan's smile was tight and brave. He knew they'd never see each other again.

Tumult wracked the rest of the galaxy, but the towering wroshyr forests of Kashyyyk were unmoved. Lowbacca had forgotten about that timeless strength. He'd been too long away.

When his commandeered Fury starfighter dropped out of hyperspace and approached the verdant planet, he counted at least five Imperial star destroyers in orbit. None of them tried to stop him on his approach, nor did they hail him. Apparently no Imperial captain was brave enough to question a Sith. Lowbacca wondered what that boded for the war to come.

He avoided going to Thikiianna City directly. Instead he dropped into the atmosphere and reached out to touch his son. Karrashchakuk emanated surprise that his father was still alive. Lowbacca followed his unmistakable sensation in the Force and when he finally felt near, he dropped his Fury beneath the wroshyr canopy.

Riding downward on repulsors, he controlled his descent until he'd reached the lower levels of the forest. He then opened the cockpit and threw himself to the nearest thick tree-trunk. Claws splintered bark and dug in hard. When he finally gained purchase, Lowbacca used the Force and gave the Fury's controls one more nudge. The ship descended once more, into the darkest depths of Kashyyyk's forest. It would never be found by anything besides the beasts that lurked down there.

That done, Lowbacca began to climb.

He hadn't done this in decades, perhaps over a century. It was a rite of passage for young Wookiees to venture into the forest depths, far below the cities, where dangerous plants and animals reigned. It was so far down barely any sun touched the tree-trunks, even at midday. The forests were full of darkness and danger and as a young Wookiee, Lowbacca had found it exhilarating beyond words. He'd faced greater darkness and danger since, and lost more than he cared to remember. As he climbed steadily upward, clawing up bark

and then pulling himself from branch to branch, he felt the weight of years slip slowly away. He felt his son grow nearer too, reaching out with the Force and telling his father it was going to be okay.

It wasn't as simple as that. Despite the moment's exhilaration he knew that Kashyyyk and the galaxy were at their lowest point in a century. The Empire would do its best to stamp out whatever resistance the Wookiees could mount. The Jedi Order was broken and scattered as it hadn't been since the days of Palpatine.

As he continued his climb toward his son, toward the light, his muscles ached with exhaustion. His chest labored for breath and his mind fell besieged by all he'd lost. He'd not felt Kol Skywalker's death as he'd felt Jade's, but the reports he'd picked up from the Sith fighter's comms were undeniable. There was no telling how many more Jedi he'd trained and fought with and cared about were dead. They'd gone to join a roll of the dead that for Lowbacca went back to the birth of the New Jedi Order. He could remember them all, faces blurred in memory but never gone: Kol and Jade and Arlen, his daughter Rallranarra, Jaina, Jacen, Anakin, Tahiri, Tenel Ka, Zekk, Raynar, Jodram Tainer, Allana Djo, Ben Skywalker, his wife Katia, Leia Organa Solo, Mara Jade Skywalker, Luke Skywalker himself, too many more to count.

It was all so much.

After Arlen's death he'd been seized by the need for an ending. That was no longer the case. Even as his whole body screamed protest he kept climbing toward the Force beacon that was his son. He might have been the only Jedi left who remembered all those faces. As long he lived, someone remembered them still.

When he reached his son, Karrashchakuk pulled him onto the back of an old repulsor-sled and wrapped his father in a strong embrace. Lowbacca returned it with as much strength as he could manage. He heard a trill from the sled's controls and saw Sirrakuk bare her fangs happily.

As Lowbacca caught his breath his son started telling him about the Wookiee resistance. It was still in the earliest

stages, but they'd already moved the supplies the Alliance had given them to the lower levels where the Imperials would never find them. There was still so much to do, from contacting other cells to selecting strategies. Karrashchakuk sounded eager to be do as much as he could, as fast as he could.

Lowbacca reminded him that being a good Jedi required patience. They'd figure things out in time. If they had faith, they'd prevail. He told his son and sister that. He told them the Empire had gone and it had come back and one day it leave again.

They were here to stay.

Because the Galactic Alliance, naturally, had no throne for an emperor, one had to be installed for Roan Fel's first official audience. The vista selected was grand without being bombastic, a broad chamber with a low ceiling and a wide view of Galactic City's skyline. The metal throne had been specially constructed and installed within the past day. Morlish Veed had arranged both the site and the throne's creation, as he explained to Calixte and the other moffs as they waited for Fel to show. He spoke with the enthusiasm of a man who expected to sit on the throne himself, and she wanted to smack the fool before he gave away their entire plan. Thankfully, the emperor arrived before that happened.

It wasn't actually Roan Fel, but had Calixte not known otherwise she'd have been fooled. Despite being head of intelligence she knew little of Fel's body double, only that he existed and had once been a professional actor. The man must have been a loyal subject as well. He walked toward the throne and to his death with utmost regal dignity, the perfect image of a triumphant but sober monarch.

He brought four Imperial Knights with him, two men and two women. The impulsive younger one, Draco, was visibly absent but Calixte marked the emperor's cousin. As the procession passed by the kneeling moffs, Mohrgan Valtor didn't even dart an eye in her direction.

The moffs remained bowed as the body double lowered himself to the throne. With a proud and booming voice,

Valtor said, "Rise! Behold Roan Fel, Emperor of the Galaxy!"

The moffs rose as one. The body double remained firm on his throne as Veed stepped forward.

"My beloved emperor," he said, "Thank you for calling us here today. I'm glad we can honor you in the place where you belong- Coruscant, the center of the galaxy. It has been one hundred and twenty-seven years since this world was in the hands of its *rightful* owners. We are all proud to be a part of this moment."

After that Veed began summarizing what everyone already knew, pronouncing each piece of victory with relish. "The Alliance navy has been dismantled. By your benevolent order, its enlisted men and lower-ranking officers will be sent home. Its admirals and captains have surrendered to our custody and await whatever judgment you see fit. Most pleasing of all, not a single Alliance world has refused the surrender order." Veed spread his hands. "Clearly, the entire galaxy recognizes the rightness of our cause."

The body double accepted Veed's grandstanding with a tiny nod.

The admiral continued, "All of the Galactic Alliance's government offices will remain in place. As we transition to the Empire their ruling triumvirate has agreed to remain, as well- under our command, of course. Finally... Ossus has fallen and the Jedi Order is broken. What Jedi remain are scattered throughout the galaxy." Veed couldn't keep the pride from his voice. "Your Imperial Majesty, my fellow moffs, the war is over and the galaxy is again ours."

The clatter of footsteps filled the hall and Veed turned. "Eh? Who is that? Who dares- Darth Krayt?"

Veed was no actor and his surprise was shallow, but she doubted anyone else noticed. The other moffs were genuinely taken aback by the figures who marched into the chamber. There was Darth Maladi of course, and also Kol's killer, Darth Nihil. Calixte forced her eyes off him and onto a Chagrian male, red and black tattoos swirling across his high-horned head. Maladi had mentioned a Darth Wyyrlok, apparently the third of his name, successor to his mother and

grandfather who had all served their Dark Lord through the decades. This was clearly he.

And finally, there was Lord Krayt, Dark Lord of the Sith. He looked more animal than human, with mis-matched eyes of red and blue glaring through the holes of a savage helmet. His body was encased in rough armor, almost like a Yuuzhan Vong's. When Maladi had first told her about Darth Krayt, Calixte had struggled to believe it. Yet here he was, plain as fact: a Sith Lord almost two hundred years old, architect of this great war and leader of a dark side cult that had laid low for a century to achieve this moment.

Calixte thought of herself as patient, cunning, and self-mastering. As Krayt strode past her she trembled with awe.

The four Sith walked straight to the throne. Calixte thought they might tear out their lightsabers and kill Fel's double right there, but instead they stopped a few meters away. None bowed.

The emperor's double finally spoke. Pitch and intonation were a perfect match for Roan Fel's. "Ah, our Sith... allies. You're early. Lord Maladi, Lord Krayt, Lord Nihl. We had heard you were wounded at Ossus, but I see the reports were exaggerated. And Darth Wyyrlokk... The Empire owes you much. Our victory would not be possible without you. What reward would you name?"

Krayt's eyes narrowed beneath his mask and blue lightning sparked between his fingertips. "Your life, Emperor Fel."

Then he attacked. Fel's guards were ready. Mohrgan Valtor sprung forward, white saber in hand, and shouted, "Imperial Knights! Save your Emperor!"

Only Darth Krayt moved. Two lightsabers, both scarlet, emerged from his plated fists. Despite his massive size and thick armor he was swiftly among the Knights. Calixte watched, breathless, as he cleaved the arm off one Knight, and with the other blade speared the man through the chest, cutting off his agonized scream.

"Do not interfere!" Veed spread his arms. "You cannot stop this."

The moff beside him scowled. "Shut it, Veed. You *knew* this was going to happen!"

Quietly Veed said, "If that's so, Geist, you'd best choose your next words carefully."

Krayt was a storm. He reared back and pounded one foot into a Knight's chest, audibly cracking her ribs. Another Knight attacked him from behind, but her lightsaber scorched across his armor without cutting through. Krayt snapped an elbow back. Its jagged point drove into her skull and punched through, leaving a red hole in her forehead as she dropped dead to the ground. The Knight with the broken ribs tried to stand upright, which only made it easier for Krayt to take off her head.

Mohrgan Valtor interposed himself between Krayt and the body double, who cowered against the throne in honest terror. Krayt was on him with both sabers and Valtor managed to defend at first, but when he tried to strike a blow at Krayt's flank his white blade skidded pathetically off the armor.

Krayt swung two blades in parallel, doubling the force. Valtor tried to block them but his weapon was knocked from his hands. He looked at his empty palms, stunned, and then Krayt speared him upward through his chest. The impact lifted Valtor off his feet, and Krayt casually dumped his corpse on the ground.

Then he advanced on Fel's double. The poor man could only cower on his false throne as Krayt cut him once across the chest, severing head and shoulders from everything below. In pathetic pieces, the body slumped and spilled out of the throne.

The three other Sith remained where they were when the fight began, still as statues.

Slowly, purposefully, Krayt turned to his audience. "And what, you ask, is the meaning of this? Roan Fel never fully embraced the war or the idea of a unified galaxy. He went along with it as a political necessity. That's not what the Empire, and this galaxy, needs.

"The galaxy writhes in chaos and disorder. It requires a man of vision." He strode to the now-open throne and set himself upon it. "*I am that man of vision. I am the new Emperor. Grand Admiral Morlish Veed, by virtue of your rank, you must be the first to swear fealty and loyalty to me.*"

With visible reluctance, Veed prostrated before the throne. "I so... swear, Your Excellency."

Krayt swung his ice-and-fire eyes to the other moffs. "Now, the rest of you."

They joined Veed on the ground immediately. "We so swear," they said as one.

"Go," said Krayt. "I will summon you again later. You will then learn how you will serve me."

The Imperials hurried from the throne room as if chased by monsters. Scowling, Veed whispered, "That wasn't the deal, Calixte! *I* was to be Emperor!"

"Morlish, you've been stabbed in the back by a Sith and you're surprised?" She shook her head. "Bide your time. Watch your tongue. The future is not yet written. You may *yet* become the new Emperor."

And she might yet survive this. As times Nyna Calixte had despaired of getting this far without falling to one lethal enemy or another. Yet she was here, and if Roan Fel had taken her advice, her position was secure for a time to come.

The waste extraction system beneath the government sector of Galactic City was hardly fit for an emperor, but passage was required to reclaim his throne and Roan Fel hadn't hesitated to enter. He and Draco moved swiftly together down the path Calixte had specified. They wore dark cloaks over their armor and carried only their lightsabers. Both kept open to the Force, sensing for any Sith lying in ambush, but as yet they hadn't been betrayed.

"Your Majesty, what of the Princess Marasiah?" asked Draco.

"She's en route to Bastion. We'll contact her *after* we're away." He'd felt a small touch from Hogrum Chalk, saying that he and princess had secreted aboard a shuttle and were taking off.

They were getting close to the end of the path. Before passing through the final doors they drew their lightsabers and ignited them.

Past the threshold was a single ship: small, unarmed, but serviceable. As Roan and Draco stepped forward, objects

moved out of the shadows: droids with round bodies and bending limbs tipped by small blasters.

"Halt, sentients," one droid blared. "This is a restricted area. Identify yourselves."

Only one thing for it. Roan and Draco moved at once, attacking the droids. The younger man was faster, taking down one droid with a vertical slash, then cutting another horizontally. Roan kicked himself in the air, using the Force to soar aboard another droid's sprayed laserfire before coming down on it hard, saber-blade like a spear.

By the time he extricated himself Draco had cut down a fourth droid, leaving only one left. They moved on it together, easily batting back its blasts. Draco hung off at the last moment, allowing his emperor to get the kill. One saber-slash ended it all.

As the droid clattered in pieces to the ground a fierce pain seized Roan's chest. He clasped it, afraid he'd been hit, then saw Draco wincing too. With pain came panic, but they both lasted mere seconds. Far away, Roan felt his cousin's life wink out.

Draco's face relaxed but went pale. "Mohrgan... The others..."

"I felt it, too." Fel let fresh anger smolder inside him. "We will honor their sacrifices and escape."

Draco looked at the broken machines. "Were we betrayed?"

"Just normal security droids. The Sith would have come themselves if they'd known."

"So does that make Calixte our ally?" Draco looked disgusted at the prospect.

"Only for today." Roan jabbed his saber-tip at the shuttle. "Hurry, before they realize they've slain the wrong Knights."

"To the *Jagged Fel*, sir?"

"And from there to Bastion. Krayt may be swaying the moffs right now, but there are still those who will fight for the *true* emperor."

His thoughts went back to Mohrgan, which in turn led them to Elliah and Vitor and his father. Every new wound the Sith gave him just stirred the decades-old embers in his heart, keeping them warm for a future burn.

“Krayt has made the wrong enemy,” Roan growled and cherished his anger. “Believe me, Master Draco, I look forward to teaching him the cost.”

It should have been a moment of triumph, but Darth Krayt bled dissatisfaction in the Force. His merciless battle against four Imperial Knights had impressed even Darth Nihl, but as Krayt looked down on the torn bodies his lips set into a scowl.

“Darth Maladi,” he rumbled.

“What is your will, My Lord?”

“That was *not* Roan Fel! Explain yourself!”

“Master... He...”

“He was a double!” With a flick of a hand Krayt threw Maladi the ground. Nihl and Wyyrlok didn’t move and didn’t flinch, but deep inside Nihl scolded himself. Krayt’s prowess and the thrill of victory blinded him to a simple fact: That had been too easy.

Krayt loomed over Maladi, red and blue eyes boring down on her. “The *real* Roan Fel could have resisted! He was a fully trained Jedi like his Imperial Knights! The *true* Roan Fel knew we were coming. He smelled a trap and has escaped. As head of intelligence you should have anticipated that!”

Maladi kept her head pressed to the floor. “You control the throne of the Empire, Dread Lord. By himself, Roan Fel is no danger to you.”

“By himself, Fel is nothing. But much of the military and even some of the moffs are sympathetic to him! If he calls them him and they go, it could *split* the Empire!” The anger receded from Krayt’s voice as he considered. “Still, it may be useful to find out which of the moffs and the military commanders are loyal to Fel personally and which simply to the throne, no matter who sits on it. Fel can *delay* us as we establish our vision of order, but he cannot stop it. The key will be to make certain Fel does not gain allies. He may seek out the Jedi...”

After how the Jedi had been betrayed at Mustafar that seemed unlikely, but anything was possible now. Fel was

desperate. So were the Jedi and the renegade Alliance fleet under Gar Stazi. Alone none of them had a chance to toppling Sith rule. All three combined, however unlikely, could be a danger.

"Hunt the Jedi. Get *others* to hunt as well," Krayt said. "Ten times more for one alive than one dead. One might be turned. You failed me today, Maladi. Serve me better tomorrow. Begin to engage the hunters now. We must remain strong and ready. Leave me for now."

Maladi rose. She joined Nihl without meeting his eyes and they said together, "Yes, Master." Then, they stalked out of the throne room together, leaving Wyyrlok to confer with the Dark Lord in private.

"I should have sensed it," Nihl admitted. "That was a failure on both our parts."

"It was, but more mine than yours." Maladi seemed very composed for one who'd narrowly escaped Krayt's vengeance, but he'd never seen the woman otherwise. "Darth Krayt is still pleased with your killing Kol Skywalker. Almost as pleased as you are with yourself."

"Kol Skywalker was the greatest of the Jedi. I have every reason to be proud."

"I'm not arguing. Just remember, nothing lasts forever. Especially Krayt's favor."

Nihl knew that. There were many more Jedi to hunt. Fel and Stazi remained threats. The Sith were triumphant, but there were still obstacles to achieving perfect order. He thought on them and was not intimidated. He had come this far and had no reason to doubt he could go further.

With the dark side as his ally, he had no doubts at all.

The Mon Calamari cruiser was called *Mon Sepor*, and though it was a mighty ship it looked lonely and vulnerable as it sat in empty space beyond Hypori. That, at any rate, was what Marin Solo thought when she first saw it through *Starlight Champion's* cockpit. To her, everything seemed lonely and vulnerable now.

She'd barely talked with Nat on the long ride here and hadn't spoken to the Jedi at all. Everything seemed to exist in

a vague dream state where time and action meant nothing. She was waiting to feel something. She knew there was all kind of emotional pain to come: grief, regret, self-loathing, desperation and delusion. For now, it was all dulled and distant.

When she'd seen *Fast Start* ripped apart from *Champion's* cockpit, Marin had frantically tried to open herself to the Force and reach for her husband, her father, her daughter. She'd spent so many years consciously denying the Force that it had been difficult to find it again, and once its strange power rushed through her all she'd felt was panic and dread. She'd reached out for the dying life spilling from the ship and found nothing of her father.

After their escape, as the horror slowly settled in, Marin realized that she had no idea what Benet or Ania would have felt like in the Force, had they survived. She'd denied herself its power, good and bad, for as long as they'd been in her life. If she'd allowed herself to know them with the Force maybe she'd have felt something, a spark of Benet or Ania drifting through the wreckage. That was a sickening thought and she had to push it away. She'd seen *Fast Start's* destruction with her own eyes. There was no surviving that. Her father, her husband, her daughter, they were all dead. They were dead because of a situation she'd put them in and there was no turning back time.

Marin would have to live with that, somehow.

A lot of people would struggle to live with the ruins of that day. A mere five ships had escaped Torn Station. They looked meager as they huddled on *Mon Sepor's* flight deck, and the Mon Calamari captain was visibly disappointed that less than three hundred of the promised fifty thousand of Slossar's bitter-enders had made it.

Starlight Champion set down next to the *Bottom Line*, and Marin stood with her mother in the shadow of the latter's bow, watching the captain speak with the handful of Jedi who'd survived. Nat was with them but he stood slightly apart, visibly uncomfortable. They'd heard there had been a massacre at Ossus with hundreds of Jedi killed and the survivors scattered and fugitive. Nat's brother was reportedly

among the dead. The worst of Arlen's and Kol's imagining had come true, and though they'd made contingencies neither had survived to see them.

That was something else that would hurt later, but not now.

Eventually the conversation broke. Jedi drifted in different directions but Nat came back toward Marin with the Master Zho Tuum in his shadow.

"They said thanks for the help." Nat folded his arms over his chest. "Which I guess is all there is to say."

"Are the Jedi going to be staying with the fleet?" Marin asked Zho Tuum.

The Cathar shook his long-furred head. "Most of us will be leaving. There are too few of us to do Stazi much good. Knight Konar will stay with him for a time, if the Jedi need a liaison with the Alliance."

"What's left of it," said Tamar.

Zho Tuum simply nodded.

"So that's it?" asked Marin. "You'll just scatter?"

"Scatter, go to ground. Wait, watch, listen," Tamar said. "We call it *ba'slan shev'la*. Our clan's done it before. We're doing it again now. It got us through the Empire once, and other *osik* besides."

Zho Tuum growled thoughtfully. "Perhaps we can stand to learn some things from your kind."

Tamar laughed once, very dry. "Vice-versa too. But don't tell Mekk that."

"Are you going with them?" Nat asked Marin.

"I don't have anywhere else to go. Or anyone to go with. So yeah, I think I'll lay low for a while." She let a hand fall to her side. Her mother took it and squeezed.

"What about *Champion*?" Nat tilted his head to the other ship.

She'd thought about that on the way here. It held so many memories of her father. Keeping it would hurt, once she got around to feeling hurt, but somehow she knew giving it up would hurt even more.

"I guess I'll keep it. Unless *you* want it."

"Nah. I'm hitching a ride with this guy." He thumbed at Master Tuum. "Gonna get a kindly drop-off at Kiffex."

“Droo and the kits?”

“Yeah.” Nat looked away, ashamed that he still had loved ones to go to. Marin didn’t begrudge him that, but she didn’t know how to say it.

After Zho Tuum excused himself, Nat went to go remove his belongings from *Starlight Champion*. Marin followed, though there wasn’t much she could do. He’d brought all he had in one bag. Before they walked down the landing ramp they paused and faced each other awkwardly in the hallway. She looked into that face, with its heavy eyes, thick jowls, and straggly gray beard. He was younger than her by seven years, but he looked older. She tried to map the face to that of the eager teenage apprentice who remained only in her memory and failed. They’d both been transformed, no longer Jedi but something else, two uncertain things. Nat had been one of the few people who’d carried over across the stages of her life. Now she wasn’t sure if she’d ever see him again.

She extended a hand. Nat shook it firmly. “Any idea where you’re going?” he asked.

“No idea. Might drift for a while. You going to stay on Kiffex?”

“I dunno. Droo and me talked about setting up someplace else, someplace out the way where we can start a little business.”

“You’re going to end up running a junkyard on some *osikla* Outer Rim planet, aren’t you?”

“Well, it’d be quiet.” His hands fell to his sides. “You know, you might be a fugitive, but you’re filthy rich, aren’t you?”

“You mean all those Jedi credit accounts? I gave the access info for Master Tuum. He can pass it on to what’s left of the Jedi Council and they can use it however they need to. The Calrissians still have ownership, but I’m not sure how they’re going to fare under the new regime.”

“Yeah. It’ll be harder for them to lie low.”

Marin nodded. Calrissians were friends of the Jedi and the Sith knew that. She hoped it wouldn’t come back on them. It would mean another layer of guilt and grief if something happened to Chance, Chereth, even Volgma.

They remained in the hallway, facing but not looking at each other. There wasn't anything to say but neither wanted to leave. A noise came from the base of the ramp. Marin looked down and saw her mother coming up.

"Time to get moving," her cousin said.

"I hope we'll see you around some day, Nat."

"Bantha," he reminded her. "Bantha Rawk."

"Right. I'll remember." She smiled and almost felt it. Nat turned and walked down the ramp, exchanging a curt nod with Tamar and nothing more.

Marin's mother joined her inside the ship. She was carrying a bag of her own, no bigger than Nat's.

"You pack light," Marin said.

"I've got stuff on Mekk's ship. We'll head out together."

"But you'll be here?"

"I figured you'd need a co-pilot. I *am* still capable."

"I know, Mom. Thank you."

Tamar sighed, reached out, and placed dry fingertips on her daughter's hand. "I miss him too. That damned Jedi... If I'd never run into your *buir*..." She smiled, wistful and sad. "I think I got more out of him than I deserved."

"He'd probably agree."

"Yeah. He probably would." Still smiling, still sad.

As they walked together toward the cockpit, Marin asked, "So we'll just run and hide now? That's it?"

"We've got to survive. You can't do anything extra if you're dead."

"But is survival enough?"

Tamar squeezed her daughter's hand and whispered, "Sometimes it has to be."

Over the past three years it had become almost habit for Nyna Calixte to walk into her supposedly-secure quarters and discover Darth Maladi waiting for her. Therefore she took it altogether well when she stepped into her hotel room on Coruscant and found a red lightsaber blade at her neck. She glanced sidelong and saw Maladi in the shadows, looking genuinely perturbed. Emotion was new for the Sith woman and Calixte decided she didn't like it

“Roan Fel has escaped. The one who died was his double,” the Sith said. “My master is not pleased, and I sense *your* hand in this, Nyna Calixte.”

Just as she’d been prepared for Roan Fel’s wrath, she was prepared for this too. The difference was that she’d gone into the confrontation with Fel fairly certain he wouldn’t kill her, if only because he imagined himself servant to the Force’s light side. Maladi would have no limitations.

“You underestimated Fel,” Calixte said simply. “You need my help.”

“No.”

“If Fel *is* free, you’ll need the Moff’s united. For that, you’ll need Veed. And for *that*, you’ll need me.” She stepped carefully into her quarters, boldly stepping out of the lightsaber’s swiping range. Maladi let her keep her head but angled the blade toward her sternum.

She’d survived so much already and she’d get through this. Calixte’s smile was tight and sincere as she explained, “Morlish is feeling betrayed by you at the moment. He’s had such dreams, you see. I can convince him it’s in his best interests to wait for now and obey.”

Maladi looked at her, considering, for so long Calixte almost began to worry. Finally the Sith said, “I wonder, if I dissected your mind, would I learn the truth about you?”

“Would that serve your best interests? Are we not both better off as allies?”

Maladi angled to face her. The Sith let her lightsaber shrink off and stepped close. “No. You will serve, however. You still manage all Imperial security and espionage activities but you will report to *me*. Your first assignment: find Roan Fel.”

Maladi spun on a heel and stepped halfway out the door before turning to give one last intimidating look. “Your plots, your betrayals, your desire for control.... Had you Force ability, you might have made a good Sith- under Darth Sidious. Under Darth Krayt, we are a different breed.”

Maladi marched out the door, leaving Calixte alone in her quarters. She whispered softly, “So you believe, Lady Maladi... and that will be the knife that kills you.”

The Sith had shown they weren't lacking for savagery or ambition. Kol had told her once that the dark side of the Force was like a narcotic. The more you drew on it, hoping to control its power, it ended up controlling you. The Sith were patient and clever, but also contained the seed of their own demise.

So Calixte would wait. She felt the confidence that had been building inside her finally overflow. She'd outwitted Veed, Fel, Maladi, the Dark Lord of the Sith himself. She's survived and reached heights of power and influence she'd only dreamed of as Morrigan Corde.

Her heart wavered when she thought of Kol and Cade, but she pushed them into that cold place inside that felt all the more distant. Today was a victory. For most of the way she'd doubted she'd make it out alive. Calixte walked over to the window and looked out at the skyline of Coruscant, soon to be officially returned to its proper name of Imperial Center. The sun had slipped beneath the towers and the sky was violet fast dimming to black. Countless window-lights glowed to mark the trillions whose lives continued onward, unaware or stubbornly unheeding of the history that had been made today.

Tomorrow the sun would rise, the shadows would retreat, and light would shine on those towers once more. Tomorrow was also a day, but it would not be like the ones gone before. Even the most determined would not be able to ignore the fact forever.

Content with her place in the new order of things, Nyna Calixte turned from the bright night and began planning for day.

Epilogue: Inheritors

When the round hatch cracked open light fell inside the crippled escape pod, blinding her. Shuddering from cold and huddled in one corner, Ania shielded her eyes until she dared crack her fingers and peek through.

“Just one in here,” a voice said. Two faces were visible through the open hatch, looking inside. One was green, spiny, with a long snout. Rodian. The second was flat and brown with leathery skin. A Nikto. Travelling with her parents across the galaxy, Ania had seen just about everything.

“It’s just a child,” said the second voice, the Nikto’s. “A girl.”

“Are you sure?” asked the Rodian.

“Sure I’m sure. You can’t tell?”

“Humans all look the same to me.”

The Nikto gave a suffering sigh, then reached into the pod. “Come here, girl. Take my hand.”

Ania stared at it. This felt like a dream. Everything felt like a dream since her grandfather had followed her out of *Fast Start*’s cockpit. Maybe she really was dreaming, or maybe she was dead.

“Take my hand, come on,” the Nikto said.

There was no place else to go. She reached out, took it, and let him pull her out of the pod. Her legs trembled and she readied herself against the pod’s exterior. They were in some big hangar space, where several more escape capsules had been brought in.

“W-Where am I?” she asked.

"You're on the station. Torn Station," the Rodian said. "We're trying to clean up the big mess the Imps left behind."

"We should bill them," grumbled the Nikto.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'd be happy to pay. Listen, girl, what ship were you on? Do you know if anybody else made it out?"

She forced her mind to focus on those last awful moments. Alarms wailing, lights dying, the ship losing gravity and then atmosphere. Her grandfather, that slow white-bearded old man who'd shown up out of nowhere, had suddenly moved faster than anyone was supposed to, pushing through the air on unseen power, propelling himself and Ania toward the escape pods.

She remembered panicking and asking where her father was. Even then, deep down, she must have known he was dead. And her mother-

She'd never even seen the ship her mother was using. It was her grandfather's, she remembered. That just brought Ania's thoughts spiraling to the old man. She remembered him throwing her without really throwing her. She remembered being carried by an invisible force and thrown into the escape pod, and she remembered the hatch sealing automatically as the hull breached. She remembered her last sight before it closed: the old man looking relieved.

Ania tried to remember her grandfather's name and realized she'd never heard it. Now she never would.

"Hey, kid," said the Rodian. "Your ship. You remember the name?"

"Take it easy. She's shocked out of her mind." In a softer voice the Nikto asked, "Do you have any family, girl? Anyone who might've come through?"

Not her father. Not her grandfather. "M-My mother," she got out. "Maybe..."

"Okay. That's good. What's her name?"

"Marin. Marin Solo."

"Okay, thanks. We'll see what we can find. What's *your* name?"

"Ania."

"Okay, good. Come on with us. Come over here."

The Nikto put a hand on her shoulder and guided her away. She stumbled toward the far bulkhead where several dozen beings of different species were huddled, all shocked and trembling, survivors just like her. She scanned their faces for her mother's and didn't find it. She was the only young person there and she stood apart from them all. She leaned back against the wall, slumped down, and hugged her knees to her chest.

Her father dead. Her mother gone. She'd been with them, always, as long as she could remember. She'd never even tried to imagine life without them.

The Rodian and Nikto stepped away, then bent close for conversation. They seemed to think they were out of earshot but Ania could just pick up their conversation.

"We've only got a couple more pods," the Nikto said. "I don't think we're gonna find her mom."

"Yeah, me neither."

"What do you want to do with her?"

"How am I supposed to know? That's not my job."

"Stang it, she's a kid."

"She doesn't look *that* young. Let her fend for herself."

"You said all humans look the same."

The Rodian shrugged. "The kid's not my problem and she's not yours. She's just one more nobody."

The Nikto nodded grimly, acquiesced. "There's lots of lost people today."

"Exactly. It's not our problem. She'll fend for herself, just like everybody else. Come on, let's open the last pods."

The walked away and didn't look back. Ania hugged her legs to her chest, pressed her chin into her kneecaps, and tried to stop shivering. She wanted to deny all those horrible things they'd said but she couldn't. They were exactly right. She had no father, no mother. No ship. No droid friends. No one to help and no one to trust.

Ania Solo was on her own.

Though the adults in the room were all talking over her and past her, Marasiah tried to follow them with utmost dignity. She was still Princess of the Empire and heir to her father's

throne. She had to be. She had no idea what else she could be if she wasn't.

"We'll have to move fast to establish allies," her father said. "Veed and his Sith masters are consolidating control of the fleet but if we move quickly we can sway admirals' allegiance."

They were aboard her father's star destroyer. After their flight from Coruscant, they'd met up with Admiral Fenel's flagship *Resolute* in Bastion's orbit. The admiral, Treis Sinde, and her grandmother had joined them on the *Jagged Fel*.

"I know Admiral Challon is with us," Fenel said. "And General Jaeger. I can't speak for Sha Dun. I assume Yage is a lost cause."

Her father nodded grimly. "We may be able to sway Sha Dun yet. If we can hold Bastion, we can draw others to our cause. The people of the Empire respect strength."

"With all due respect," her uncle Hogram said, "Krayt and Veed control Coruscant and the heart of the old Alliance. *They* have the strong position. Ours is weak."

"We will only get weaker if we don't stand and fight," Fenel snapped.

"I wasn't suggesting we run, admiral."

"If we make a stand as Bastion, battle will come," Marasiah's grandmother said. She'd been listening thoughtfully until now, and the former empress' words commanded attention. "Admiral Fenel, do you have the strength to defend Bastion against a siege?"

"With Admiral Challon's ships and my own, yes, I believe we do."

"Against *all* of Veed's fleets? Against the Sith?"

"The Imperial Knights are not afraid to battle Sith," Draco said, but Marasiah caught a little tremor in his voice.

"If Krayt and Veed try to take Bastion from us, it will use considerable resources," Roan said. "They'll be spread thin elsewhere."

"That will do us no good," Hogram said. "Who else can fight them? Who can we ally with? The Jedi? Admiral Stazi's renegades?"

“Stazi and the Jedi can’t even help themselves,” said Sindre mournfully. “They’d only drag us down.”

“They are also *not* our allies,” Fennel said. “His Majesty is the rightful emperor. For him, and us, there are only servants and traitors.”

They were harsh words, but Marasiah’s father nodded agreement. “There’s no point in working with Stazi or the Jedi now. We must consolidate our fleets *and* find those within Krayt’s empire who will help us quietly.”

“That is true,” said the elder Marasiah. “But what about Bastion?”

“We can hold it,” Fennel said firmly. “With all the ships still loyal to Your Majesty, we can withstand a siege, even if it lasts months. Years.”

“And then what?” asked Hogrum. “If we throw everything into defending Bastion we can do nothing else.”

“We can’t just sit on our hands and *let* Krayt have the capital,” the admiral snarled.

“Yes,” the emperor’s mother said. “We can. And we should.”

Everyone stared in surprise, everyone except the emperor himself. Roan said, “Go on.”

The elder Marasiah sighed. “A stand at Bastion is what the Sith want. They can trap us here and keep us impotent. We’ll be alone. Who will rally to our cause? The people of the Alliance won’t care. No one will. Your empire, Roan, the empire of your father and grandfather, will become irrelevant before it’s ground to nothing.”

They were harsh words. Fenel and Draco looked ready to interject, but Roan’s expression was thoughtful. Marasiah realized this was what her father had been thinking all along.

“There are other options,” Roan said. “If we surrender Bastion- temporarily- it will free our resources for other actions. Hit and run attacks. Raids to gather supplies.”

“We’d fight like insurgents, then.” Fenel’s voice dripped distaste.

But the Emperor nodded. “We are not in the position to challenge Krayt yet. But we can bide our time. Rebuild. I know these Sith. They will turn on each other in time, and

when they do, we'll be ready to save the galaxy from their chaos."

"Where will we go until then?" Draco asked. "Where can we hide?"

"The Unknown Regions," the elder Marasiah said. "We still have family there."

"*Chiss* family," Sinde specified. "What about Fehlaaur? He's loyal to Krayt, just like the rest of the Moff Council."

"There are factions within the Chiss Ascendancy," Roan said. "Frequently, one knows nothing of what the other is doing."

It sounded a little like the Empire, but the princess kept that thought to herself. Dignified and silent, she listened to the adults go on. The emperor articulated his tentative plan. Only Fenel and Sinde dared question parts of it, and even then with the most polite language. By the end of the meeting the plan had become an order, and everyone broke off to do their part in carrying it out. The Imperial Knights and all the emperor's loyalists were to withdraw from Bastion, save a handful of spies who'd stay behind and feign allegiance to Krayt.

And then all of them would leave the Empire behind for places unknown, with only a promise of return to keep them going.

No one was excited to carry out these orders. Marasiah could feel that clearly, but they all did it because that was their duty. After the chamber had emptied of everyone but the princess and her father, Roan turned to her and said, "You were very quiet, daughter."

"I was listening."

"I know, but you have to learn to do more than that. What are *your* thoughts on all this?"

"I think... you made the right choice."

"Why?"

"It's what Grandmother said. If we bottle all our ships to defend the capital we can't do anything else. We'd be sure to lose. So we have to gather the people loyal to you, regroup, and hope."

"Hope?"

That word shouldn't have sounded so bitter. "Hope the Sith turn on each other. Hope your other admirals realize what a mistake it is, siding with them. But..."

She hesitated. "Go on," he said.

"The Sith fight with treachery and deceit." She felt chill and hugged herself. "They strike through the people closest to us. How can you trust *anyone*?"

Roan laid both hands on her shoulders. "I should have seen through Niin. I will always regret that. I will make *sure* the people we bring to Chiss space are loyal."

Marasiah wasn't sure how he could guarantee that. She wasn't sure of anything. Even while this war had raged she'd felt safe on Bastion, impregnable like an emperor's daughter was supposed to. Her mother's death had changed all that and she wondered if she'd ever feel safe again. But she sensed her father needed affirmation, so she gave him a nod.

"One day you will become Empress," Roan said. "By the time that day arrives, I will have regained what I have lost. You will inherit it all, Marasiah. The entire galaxy will be *yours*."

She felt nothing but hard conviction from him. That gave no comfort either. She tried to think of what she could become besides princess and monarch, but nothing came. She was no longer sure if she wanted to walk that path, but she'd have to regardless. For Marasiah Fel, like her father, the path had been set from the start.

Cade Skywalker drifted through the void and waited to die.

Black space spread around him, dotted with endless stars. He'd never seen so many. There was nothing between him and them except empty space and the thin transparent faceplate of his vacuum suit. The far light seemed cold and distant, the darkness welcoming.

His body spun slowly as it drifted and sometimes he'd tilt to face the green and brown world beneath him, but Cade could never look at Ossus for long. The pain of his father's death there would come back, and he'd turn his eyes against to the dark.

He didn't know how long he'd been in the void. It had probably been days. At first he'd attempted a Force trance to conserve oxygen. He'd struggled against his fresh and awful memories, but eventually settled into a vague and troubled sleep. When Cade awoke he was still in the void, still over Ossus. His lips had gone so dry they'd cracked, and he'd passed beyond hunger to an aching hollowness. His body was so weak he could barely move his limbs. The next time he drifted off to sleep he knew he'd never wake.

Cade found he didn't mind dying like this, alone in the void. It was peaceful here, far from everything. Far from the Sith who wanted to kill him, the greedy Imperials who wanted the galaxy for themselves, the Jedi who wanted to solve everyone's problems and made them worse instead.

Far from his father.

He stared into the dark to forget, but sometimes the memories came back. Fighting with his father and Master Sazen on the landing platform. His father barking at him, commanding him to run. The shuttle packed full of terrified younglings and Shado wrestling with the controls.

The pain of his father's dying moments.

All that came after that was awful too. Master Sazen had been dying from his injuries. Cade had refused to let that happen. Desperate and aching and angry from his father's death, he'd called on the Force to mend Sazen's wounds. The strength that had passed from him to Sazen had been a fierce, painful energy, but it had felt *good*. Dark or light, it didn't matter to Cade. It had saved his teacher.

The mending energy passed, but the anger had not. In a red rage, Cade had grabbed his lightsaber and rushed to the Twintail fighter tucked into the shuttle's hold. TIE fighters were attacking the ship from all sides, preventing their escape. Shado had shouted at Cade, telling him that to take one fighter against so many TIEs was suicide.

We take what is given, Cade had said. He'd learned that from his father.

So Cade had gone into the void. With his starfighter and his anger he'd shot down fighter after fighter, taking lives and

loving it, all the while knowing it would never bring his father back.

But anger gave him power. Anger gave him purpose. Cade took what he was given.

When his Twintail exploded he'd grabbed the ejection lever and shot himself into space. He couldn't remember why he'd done that. When his ship had burst around him he could have stayed where he was and died with it in one simple white-hot flash. Then he could have joined his father in the Force, or dissolved into oblivion. Either would have been simpler than living.

Maybe it was so he could have this moment. Cade was going to die in the void but he was at peace. He felt drained of dark anger as he floated, hollow and cold, emptied even of grief. Only memories could hurt him, and soon they'd be gone.

This is good, he told himself. This is alright. Better to die in the void than live the legacy that had been left to him.

Time passed. Thought and memory faded.

And then it stopped. Cade didn't notice at first. Ossus, which had been drifting slowly across his vision as he drifted through the void, was holding steady before him. Then something glared in the corners of his sight. His eyes fluttered shut, then opened slowly. Bright light shone from behind him and glared on the backs of his hands, the shoulders of his suit.

He found the Force and twisted his body around. The bright light hurt in his eyes and he raised a hand to block it. There was a single starship ahead of him, long-bodied, rugged. He tried to feel the minds inside. They weren't Jedi, weren't Sith. They were strangers who meant nothing to him.

The ship grew larger. They were reeling him in with a tractor beam. Quiet sadness filled Cade Skywalker as he realized he was going to live.

Hyperspace slipped past as an endless river of shadow and light. K'Kruhk watched it from the cockpit of the Sekotan flier and felt as though he had been dragged in its undertow his entire life and never fully emerged from the current.

A century and a half ago the Jedi Order had fallen, a dark empire had risen, and K'Kruhk had found himself a survivor entrusted with the care of frightened younglings. He's done everything he could to shepherd them to safety and for a time it had appeared he'd succeeded. But in the end he'd failed them, and he'd spent decades crippled by that failure. It had taken him years more to become a true Jedi again, and to fully participate in Luke Skywalker's new Order. At first he'd been terrified that history would repeat, but gradually his paranoia had waned and he'd allowed himself to enjoy being a Jedi again.

And now, a century and a half later, K'Kruhk was back in the same place again.

He had every reason to despair, yet as he stared at the endless river he found that he did not. He let the river take him back in time, a century and a half, to a place of darkness and light. In his mind it was still vivid after all these many years:

Mortars scream through the skies of Saleucami. Shelling of the Republic redoubt has not stopped for ten standard hours. It is midday but smoke and ash fill the sky and swallow daylight. The explosions never stop.

He shelters from them beneath a rocky overhang. Master A'Sharad Hett sits beside him, tired head bent forward, legs splayed out. He clutches a lightsaber with either hand, but has barely the strength to grasp them.

He asks the human, "Do you believe the rumor that there is an architect of this war behind Count Dooku?"

Hett blinks himself awake. "You mean a Sith?"

He nods gravely.

Hett considers this. His eyes grow clouded and eventually he says, "I think this war doesn't need Sith. The corruption of the Senate, the greed of the Trade Federation and Techno Union, Master Dooku's pride... The galaxy is full of darkness and chaos. Master Windu says that is the natural state of things, and that we Jedi must create light and peace ourselves. Only through us can there be order."

It sounds terribly like the so-called wisdom Sora Bulq and Count Dooku's other minions have tried to spread. With

great power comes the desire to enforce one's will on other beings, and one can easily slip into the darkness thinking he is doing light.

"Is it truly the Jedi's order to give?" he asks.

Hett looks down at his lightsabers. His hands tighten around them.

"Sometimes," Hett says. "Perhaps."

He makes a low rumble, indicating disapproval. "Such thinking may lead you do a dire end, Master Hett. Remember the fate of your father."

Unlike most Jedi, A'Sharah Hett knew his parents. Sharad Hett was a Jedi turned Tusken, killed in a battle against Tatooine's gang lords. It is a sensitive spot, and he immediately regrets jabbing it.

"You never knew my father," Hett says harshly.

"I know. I apologize. But remember... with the desire for control comes enslavement to ego. The conviction of righteousness becomes a delusion that justifies the worst horrors."

"I know all that, Master K'Kruhk." The human sighs.

"The Force is so much more than a tool. It is our sustenance. As long as we remain open to the light it will nurture and guide us, even in our darkest moments."

Hett looks at him sidelong, suspicious. "When did you become an optimist?"

"I'm endeavoring to change my ways." Lips flex around his tusks, a Whiphid smile. "It is not easy, but someone needs to be one, in times like this."

"Maybe so." Hett smiles too, but it's very tired. "And if this war really is one giant Sith trap?"

He feels a chill. Optimism can only do so much. "Then there are darker times ahead. But we'll still have the Force. As long as it speaks to us, we can endure."

Hett looks wistfully at the black clouds, the flash of distant bombs. He sighs and says, "You came to me about doing a scouting mission."

"That's right."

"Then it sounds like we've chatted long enough. Thank you, Master. I'll try to remember all that."

With a groan, Hett pushes to his feet. He still has a lightsaber still in either hand. Together they set out across the rocky field, to that narrow place on the horizon where darkness meets light.

K’Kruhk stepped out of the cockpit and into the flyer’s hold. Every head turned toward him and every face pleaded for comfort. Among all those children Khat Lah stood out, but his need was the same as theirs.

“It will be another day before we reach the hidden temple,” K’Kruhk told everyone. “Don’t be afraid. We will get there, and we will be safe from the Empire. All your fellow apprentices should be there too.”

He projected strength and warmth in the Force. On most of their young minds it worked easily, but Khat Lah was still full of questions. He made a gesture and the Yuuzhan Vong withdrew himself from young Eli Horn’s side. Together the warrior and the Jedi Master stepped into the empty cockpit. Outside, light and shadow continued to flow.

“The apprentices must stay in the hidden temple,” K’Kruhk said. “It is the only safe place for them. They are the future of the Jedi. I only hope enough masters survived to train them. As for you, Khat Lah, you cannot only sense the Force, you can use it. You showed that on Ossus.”

“Perhaps,” the warrior said uncertainly. “I do not know *what* I did. I willed the lightsaber to move... and it moved.”

“You’re just beginning to unlock your potential. Do you want to continue?”

Uncertainty vanished. Khat Lah nodded.

“That is good. I’m sure we can find a place for you at the hidden temple, if you wish.”

He looked reluctant. “I am no youngling. I understand why they must hide... but I would feel a coward to do myself.”

“What would you do instead?”

“I know Master Nei Rin was away from Ossus during the attack. She may be on Euceron still, or elsewhere. I want to find out if she survived.”

“Of course. We may go looking for her.”

“*We*, Master *Jeedai*?”

“Yes. We, I think.” He looked out the viewport to the blurring dark and light. “I’d thought I’d seen and experienced everything the Force could offer... But you are something *new*, Khat Lah. I cannot understand you at all, and you have no idea how precious that is to someone as old as I am. I would teach you, if you’d let me. And, hopefully, I can learn from you as well.”

The Yuuzhan Vong bobbed his head. “I would be honored. Only...”

“Yes?”

“I do not want to put *you* in danger, Master.”

The Whiphid snorted. “I am not so old I cannot take care of myself.”

“Yes. But these are dark times for the Jedi.”

“I know that better than you ever could. I have seen the destruction of the Jedi Order once before, but I have also seen it rise. Remember this above all else. We who use the Force are not meant to be its masters. We are as fallible as any other beings and poorly suited to rule. The Force is more than a tool. It is our sustenance. Stay open to it, and it will guide you through these harrowing times.”

K’Kruhk drew deep breath and looked out the viewport, where light and dark continued to flow. “As long as the Force speaks to us, the Jedi will endure.”

